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MARITAL NORMATIVITY AND SOCIAL REINFORCEMENT IN THE SHORT  
FICTION OF EDITH WHARTON

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## ABSTRACT

Nearly all of Edith Wharton's characters are deeply entrenched within their social surroundings. While social roles are instrumental in forming identities, sometimes these roles impose oppressive restrictions on the characters, limiting their abilities to find happiness. In this thesis, I explore the different ways in which marital normativity serves as an agent of such restrictions, preventing characters from finding identities and happiness beyond their prescribed roles or from regaining acceptance after they have already committed social transgressions. I discuss five of Wharton's short stories that exemplify this paradigm: "The Line of Least Resistance," "Atrophy," "The Reckoning," "Autres Temps," and "The Long Run." The social reinforcement that occurs in these stories eventually traps characters within unhappy situations, creating disappointing endings from the perspective of the reader. By analyzing how Wharton shapes characters' desires, makes them sympathetic in spite of breaking social boundaries, and ultimately reinforces social regulations upon them, we can see how she characterizes social order as a powerful entity of its own. While readers may find disappointment with these stories' endings, they can arrive at a more in-depth critical approach to the portrayed social limitations.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) had an incredibly long and prolific career as a writer and critic throughout a transitional period at the turn of the twentieth century. Her biographer R.W.B. Lewis writes that by the 1920s she was undoubtedly heralded as “the most renowned writer of fiction in America” (xi). Pulling from “American social history” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to fuel her writings, Wharton manages to convey “larger human implications” that still have meaning in present times (Lewis xiii). While many of Wharton’s novels, such as *The Age of Innocence*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *Ethan Frome*, have received frequent critical attention, from high school classrooms to academic circles, many of her short works of fiction have been merely glanced over. Although some of her shorter pieces, such as “Roman Fever” or “The Other Two,” have gained popularity and been “frequently anthologized” (Totten 115), Wharton has written many stories that haven’t gained such critical traction. Many of her stories, however, have similar qualities to her more famous, longer works. One way in which we can view her works of fiction, short or long, is through the lens of social context and how oppressive pressures of social order can lead to character entrapment or unhappiness in present social roles. This normalizing, social restriction becomes particularly evident when examining the institution of marriage in her texts. In this thesis, I will explore five short stories that exhibit this common trait: “The Line of Least Resistance,” “Atrophy,” “The Reckoning,” “Autres Temps,” and “The Long Run.”

In the past, many of Wharton’s works have been heavily discussed primarily from the points of view of feminism or classicism. Cory Welch writes that there tends to be a divide

amongst critics who either see Wharton's novels focusing primarily on themes that discuss the plight of women or ones that reveal new orders of social status (2). It may at first be counter-intuitive to look beyond just issues of gender and class. Even Lewis introduces Wharton's literature as being a "testimony to the female experience" that reveals "modes of entrapment, betrayal, and exclusion" (Lewis xiii), supposedly limited to women alone. Furthermore, many readers of Wharton might assume at first that a feminist vision informs how we interpret social oppression in her texts—that women are always the dangerous targets of the "highly tuned organism" of social order (Knights 29). Many may also look for immediate themes related to the "dispossession of the old aristocracy" in her texts (Welch 2).

However, Welch writes, neither of these themes is evident in *all* of her novels; there are exceptions and "anomalies" that do not quite fit into either box of these thematic categories (4). These thematic deviations extend into her short stories, as well. Indeed, *Ethan Frome* and *The Age of Innocence* also feature male protagonists (Welch 2), as do two of the short stories I address in this text ("The Line of Least Resistance" and "The Long Run"). In fact, others argue that Wharton's "work is difficult to place within the conventions of 'women's writing'" since "she is influenced instead by social fictions" related to both genders (Preston xii). Similarly, while the protagonists of these Wharton stories are obviously of a wealthier state, given their abilities to travel and live with relative ease, their preoccupations throughout the narratives are not limited to their socio-economic status or class. Among her novels, neither *Ethan Frome* nor *The Custom of the Country* focuses on themes of aristocratic adaptation (Welch 2). These class issues are also absent in many of her short stories. In fact, issues of money and class transcendence rarely make appearances in this particular selection of stories.

Instead, one thing that can connect all of Wharton's longer major works is a theme of entrapment within designated social boundaries. Welch writes, "The theme of entrapment throughout Wharton's oeuvre should not be overlooked as a major thrust—perhaps the major

thrust of Edith Wharton's fiction. It defines the suffocating power, the tragic nature of her work" (18). Welch writes that each character of her major novels is given a social background that will eventually "fully ensnare [him/her] in circumstances that will powerfully contribute to the absolute, nightmarish entrapment" that her characters find themselves in by the conclusions of their stories (6). With this in mind, it is possible to see that Wharton develops a similar narrative of entrapment throughout her short stories just as she does in her larger pieces.

If there is one thing that is true for the characters of Edith Wharton's short fiction it is that their identities are closely if not entirely tied to their social relationships. Wharton makes it realistically clear that there are expectations and duties that come from maintaining these relationships which inform social identities. However, the requirements and obligations derived from social roles can limit characters from achieving desires or senses of self that lay beyond their boundaries. While many of Wharton's novel's characters, like *The Age of Innocence's* Newland Archer, acknowledge the existence of this "social formation," they still believe that some sort of "real" self survives" beyond those bounds (Knights 20). This remains true for Wharton's short story protagonists, as well. It becomes possible but complicated, then, for characters to persist in "defining interior life and a socially-constructed self" that exist in "contest" within one another (Kress 131). When characters seek this real self, they often disrupt the social order and must face identity-threatening consequences. As Pamela Knights writes, "The suggestion of the unfolding narrative is... that without the shape, the social mold, there may be no self at all" (21). This social foundation is not so quick to loosen its hold on characters that wish to escape or welcome back those who have in the past. Preston writes that Wharton's characters are members in a tribe-like society and that "to step beyond the boundary is to leave the defining conditions of tribal membership, to become marginalized or obliterated" (5). Furthermore, Preston claims that "normative married relation" is the institution "above all others" which stands for "tribal propriety" (79), and when it is threatened by the non-traditional options, reactions

occur. Therefore the characters of these short stories, both male and female, find their desired “real” selves challenged when dealing with marriage, divorce, re-marriage, or extra-marital affairs. Although normative marriage necessarily implies the negotiation of gender roles, funds, and expectations, marriage itself serves a social function beyond gender or financially-based relational dynamics.

In each of the stories I examine in this paper, Wharton reveals how the institution of marriage in particular serves as an agent of social restriction for her characters. Marital normativity becomes an important marker through which society can measure conformity and react accordingly, potentially rejecting or punishing those who attempt to behave outside of the status quo. These restrictive societal values are never more present than in her narratives, short or long, in which whose conclusions do not make for typical “happy” endings. We see how these limitations can oppress Wharton’s characters and trap them within circumstances they do not desire.

In exploring these themes in these short stories, readers can examine just exactly what it is that Wharton’s protagonists (who may not always be the narrators) are specifically fighting for. At the same time, Wharton also makes it clear that the individual’s desires come into great conflict with the demands of their given roles, and we see them deviate—or desire to deviate—from what is deemed socially acceptable given their circumstances. Oftentimes, this goal is an escape from unhappiness, disrespect, or lack of love—all of which are derived from the ways characters are locked into relationships with one another. Other times, it’s re-entry back into the normalized society after having already trespassed beyond social boundaries. In the case of each story, the social collective seems to question the channels of divorce, re-marriage, and infidelity, through which the protagonists wish to reach (or have wished to reach in the past) happiness beyond prescribed roles. It is this deviant who nearly always is cast in the protagonist’s shoes,

and it is his or her story that becomes the focus of attention, meaning, and, more often than not, readers' sympathies.

While Wharton reveals why characters' desires or actions might be damaging to their own identities as well as to others' in accordance with the imposed social order, she permits readers to "root" for them, anyway. It creates a space for the critique of "social order" that "contains entrapment and suffocation" within its limited roles and expectations (Preston 23). Jill M. Kress writes, "Though Wharton expresses fascination and even sympathy for her characters; more often than not, she suggests that for her, story-telling consists of the conflict between characters and the forces surrounding them" (162). This contrast between characters' deviating desires and the social expectations creates a space for readers to question and criticize the normative restrictions that society dictates for the primary characters through marital normativity.

In spite of opening these critical spaces, ultimately, at the conclusion of these tales, Wharton does not allow her characters to escape the responsibilities of their social roles. Instead, she enforces the questionable social structures upon them once more, enabling the very restrictions and institutions she had led us to critique. Characters are either restrained from achieving deviating goals or blocked from acceptance back into society. The various ways in which she depicts this denial of happiness in each story shape social demands almost into a character itself, with complex, wide-reaching, and determined means of keeping members of society in check. Knights describes this phenomena as a "social body" that is "a highly alert and powerful working system... alive to what will advantage it and prompt to respond to danger" (29). Both external and internalized reactions fuel these responses and limit characters in the end of Wharton's texts.

After assessing each protagonist's unique desires, and how Wharton reveals these desires go against traditional social expectations, we see how these socially-reinforcing responses eventually lead characters to entrapment and unhappiness. In "The Line of Least Resistance" and

“Atrophy,” Wharton portrays how confrontations with other groups or individuals can trap the protagonists within social boundaries regarding relationship norms. In “The Reckoning” and “Autres Temps” we are able to see the lasting nature of making tradition-breaking choices, whether these choices come back to haunt a protagonist or whether social consequences simply can’t be shaken. Finally, in “The Long Run,” Wharton demonstrates how social expectations can become so ingrained in a character that they directly enable their own unhappiness. Such examples of Wharton’s final, oppressive let-downs are not only hard on her characters of both genders; they are also hard on readers.

When readers are denied resolution to conflicts presented in the stories, after coming to sympathize and root for the protagonist to break past social limitations, it can be a disconcerting experience. It becomes possible to question why Wharton would desire for readers to get this experience out of so many of her short stories. While some might feel it is simply to confirm that norms and values are in place for a reason and are not to be tested, this might not be the only possible reader reaction. Upon examining the ways in which she presents these various elements that ultimately form her thematic entrapment in several of her short stories, it becomes clear that this form of disappointment is just another—if not more powerful form—of critique. Although it is not a particularly uplifting form of motivation, this lack of progress for this particular set of characters still offers another way to recognize and question the demands that society asks of its participants.

## Chapter 2

### **“The Line of Least Resistance:” Individual Identity against Social Consciousness**

“The Line of Least Resistance,” like many other short stories by Wharton, reveals how society utilizes the institution of marriage to enforce social restrictions and entrap characters in unhappy situations. While these characters, such as the protagonist of this tale, seek happiness beyond what they are getting from traditional relationships, either by engaging in extramarital affairs or seeking divorces, Wharton’s fictional world condemns such desires in the end. In “The Line of Least Resistance,” we are introduced to Mr. Mindon, who is the victim of an affair rather than the perpetrator. As a man, Mindon and his plight demonstrate that women aren’t the only ones subjected to the tight grips of social limitations.

In Wharton’s tale, Mindon is a calm if not indifferent husband and father, whose primary characteristic seems to be his “digestive difficulty” (341). Mindon soon discovers that his younger, frivolous wife, Millicent, has been engaging in an affair with the charming Frank Antrim. Mindon realizes that he has never been appreciated or even acknowledged by his wife or their two young daughters. In an offended frenzy, he departs from his house and marriage, leaving only a letter behind (348). Alone at a hotel, he looks forward to jumping off the precipice into individualized freedom, yet he desperately clings to thoughts of his family in light of his desertion. Seeking reactions and acknowledgement from others, Mindon at last discovers his identity and expresses himself to three associates who turn up late that night on Millicent’s behalf. The more the three men try to convince him not to leave and divorce Millicent, the more he becomes determined to do just that. However, as they start to leave him with further parting

advice against it, he loses his determination and ultimately, devastatingly, agrees to return back to his home.

Throughout this story, Wharton assigns Mindon an understandable desire for respect as an individual, with unique feelings and opinions that go beyond the blank caricature his family apparently sees. Wharton's intriguing method of never sharing his given name is just one way in which Mindon's lack of identity is reinforced. Upon seeing the emptiness of Mindon's social roles at the start of the story, readers are drawn to sympathize with him as he chooses to pursue happiness and respect instead. This is true even though these choices to leave and divorce his unappreciative wife go against accepted social norms, as Wharton also reveals. However, by the end of the story, Wharton utilizes a very literal approach of calling Mindon back to the conforming nature of society. Wharton introduces the three men, who seem remnant of a type of Greek chorus, to voice their opinions on the social drawbacks of Mindon's desired actions. These men metaphorically serve as the voice of society and are able to dominate Mindon once more, bringing him back to his role within it.

### **A Name for Himself**

In terms of identifying Mindon's boundary-breaking desire, Wharton gives evidence to suggest that the protagonist of "The Line of Least Resistance" wishes to fill gaps that his current social space has created. She maps out his journey of discovering his wife's infidelity and discovering what he really wants: a real self that can be respected by his family, beyond his current prescribed social role. In terms of relational power dynamics at the start of the story, Mindon is at least satisfied with his relationship with his wife for the time being, in spite of the fact that her identity overshadows his own. He knows that there are great personality differences between them and that they both have their faults. Millicent, for example, is constantly "finding fault"

wherever she can (342), even in Mindon. However, Mindon “pride[s] himself on being a reasonable man” (342) and doesn’t expect her to be “the perfect wife and mother” (342). That being said, Millicent, the woman, appears to hold the most power between them. It seems that Millicent’s identity dominates and alters Mindon’s, for, as the narrator describes, “[I]f her faults were the making of her, she was the making of him. It was therefore unreasonable to be angry with Millicent...” (342). This relational structure would seemingly go against common gender stereotypes in which the man is dominant in a relationship. While Mindon appears to accept this dynamic, there is still something missing—namely, any form of regard from Millicent. Even Millicent and Mindon’s children, who are essentially miniatures of their mother (342), often ignore him and take “no notice of him” (345). Instead, both his wife and daughters admire the vivacious Frank Antrim, who even Mindon admits is “charming” (344). Meanwhile, Mindon is simply described by the narrator as a wealthier man whose defining trait is a weak stomach (41).

Structurally, another notion that supports Mindon being framed as a man without a strong identity of his own is his lack of a first name. Nearly every other prominent character is assigned a first and last name. Millicent Mindon. Frank Antrim. Even the daughters, Gladys and Gwendolyn, are introduced to readers in more familiar terms, whereas Mindon remains “Mr. Mindon”—to the narrator, other characters, and the readers throughout the duration of the tale. We only know him by this formal, fixed identity that revolves around a domestic, business, or social sphere. Readers are never given a more intimate acquaintance with him—the type of comfortable relationship that he desires from other characters. Instead, Mindon is frozen at a level of distance through which Wharton does not permit him to break, another way in which she reinforces his lack of an individual, personal identity.

However, as soon as he discovers a piece of paper in his wife’s room that presumably reveals she is having an affair with Antrim (346), Mindon can’t help but feel the full weight of his family’s disrespect and his lack of an admired role among them. He feels “[h]e had never in his

life been more than an alternative to anyone” (349). Antrim has usurped Mindon’s role as a husband by becoming Millicent’s lover, as well as his role as a father by charming his daughters with gifts and a puppy (343). This painful discovery at last seems to prompt Mindon to seek a position of respect and, above all, notice. Wharton writes, “He was planning, reasoning, arguing, with unimagined facility; words flew out like sparks from each revolving thought. But suddenly he felt himself caught in the wheels of his terrific logic, and swept round, red and shrieking, til he was flung off into space” (347). This new perspective on his life and roles within it shocks him. He seeks an escape from the “pain” (347) of a world where he is not wanted and has been easily replaced by Antrim.

More than this, he seeks a newfound consciousness and self-awareness. He feels that “Millicent had kept him for years in bewildered subjection to exigencies as inscrutable as the decrees of Providence; but now his comprehension of her seemed a mere incident in his omniscience” (347). He apparently becomes empowered by his newfound realizations. The narrator observes, “His sudden translation to the absolute gave him a curious sense of spectatorship; he seemed to be looking on at his own thoughts. All the machinery worked with the greatest rapidity and precision” (347). At long last, Mindon seems able to envision a self beyond what others have made him. He can make a name for himself and shape an identity of his own creation: “For years he had been the man that Millicent thought him, the mere projection of her disdain; and now he was himself” (347). Acting upon this revelation, he calls for “cab” and immediately leaves his home to stay at a hotel, leaving only a letter of explanation behind (348). Emotionally, in terms of seeking his desire, he believes he is correct in his actions:

He was feeling, he was sure, just as a gentleman ought to feel; all the consecrated phrases—‘outraged honor,’ ‘a father’s heart,’ ‘the sanctity of home’ – were flocking glibly at his call. He had the self-confidence that comes of knowing one has on the right clothes. He had certainly done the proper thing in leaving the house at once. (348)

With this justification at hand, Mindon decides to temporarily stay at a hotel, effectively rejecting the role his family has offended and denied him. Preston writes of hotels in Wharton's works, claiming that they "are not simply an index of restlessness... their precincts filled with languishing ex-members of various tribes; they provide for these outcasts an exemplary geography of status..." (63). This change of scenery and change of heart both give Mindon power to decide he eventually will head off to New York, to more fully sever ties with his family (Wharton 350).

Just because Wharton details Mindon's desire and opens a way for escape towards it, though, does not mean that the character is fully at ease in pursuing it. This break beyond his social identity in a traditional marriage and fatherly role is bound to be at war with factors, internal and external, that abide by the expectations set by society, as we will come to see. Although his pain is derived from unhappy social circumstances, the only cure he can find rests within it, as well. Mindon wants Millicent to care that he's gone (350); he wants an audience—someone to listen and care about his desires and actions. The kind of respected identity that Mindon wants cannot be granted only from within; he needs external support to ground it, as well.

### **Self-Consciousness as Social Warning**

Although Mindon's desire to leave his family in order to seek a respected identity may be very understandable, it is still not in line with the values of his surrounding social context. Wharton gives us elements that allow us to discern that what Mindon seeks is "not right" by the surrounding social standards and norms. If, as Preston says, "normative married relation" is the preferred path to gain acceptance into society (79), then Mindon, who seeks to desert his role as a husband and father, is going against it. We can see this not only through indirect interaction with

others but also within Mindon's own conscience, since the story is told from the perspective of a third-person, limited narrator who only has direct access to Mindon's thoughts.

To begin, there is one obviously external cue that reveals that his action is surprising—the brief moment in which Mindon interacts with a hotel clerk who is described as being “astonished” at his arrival (Wharton 348). This one word reveals shock towards Mindon's actions. It is never revealed whether the clerk is actually familiar with Mindon and his family, but the fact that Wharton reveals this astonishment through her narrator, be it in Mindon's own imagination or not, suggests the beginnings of an external disapproval of his actions. This shock subtly continues through Mindon's own thoughts, in which we witness social expectations standing in direct contradiction with Mindon's desires and decision to act upon them.

The way in which societal obligations of his role as a man, in marriage and as a father, have been hardwired into his brain is revealed through his second-guessing himself, thinking in terms of what others may think of the situation. The narrator is able to present this self-doubting train of thought. First this comes in the form of a character, Mrs. Targe, and the idea that Mindon will be unable to keep a dinner obligation with her:

As his cab breasted the current of the afternoon drive he caught the greeting of a lady with whom he and Millicent were to have dined. He was troubled by the vision of that disrupted dinner. He had not yet reached the point of detachment at which offending Mrs. Targe might become immaterial, and again he felt himself jerked out of his grooves.

(348)

Furthermore, we see his need for some sort of platform on which his new sense of self can exist and be understood respected by others. In order to be understood and respected, Wharton gives clues that he requires other people to understand and respect him. He wants Millicent to care that he left (349), and when he arrives at the hotel with no one to challenge him or empathize for him, he begins to grow restless. Wharton writes, “The impressiveness of his attitude was being

gradually sapped by the sense that no one knew where he was” (350). Mindon’s concerns reveal just how entwined his identity and social situations are, even though he tries to escape them by escape the social institution of marriage.

Although Mindon’s thoughts later grow into more personal, emotional doubts in which he imagines Millicent reacting to his desertion (349), as well as thoughts of how he will miss his comforts of home that he “never before realized” he loved (350), they stem from these initial, socially self-conscious worries. We can tell that his actions would be deemed as scandalous or unacceptable through external cues in addition to his personal projections and self-incriminating worries.

### **The Collective Social Consciousness and Reinforcement**

In contrasting Mindon’s desire for a break from his current, socially-bound identity and the social restrictions placed upon him by it, Wharton creates a space for readers to critique this burden of social restraint. Wharton shapes the narrative—from Mindon’s unhappy family life, to the shock of his discovery of his wife’s affair, to his decision to escape a home where he is not wanted—to make readers sympathize with Mindon and his decision to save some kind of dignity or respect for himself, even though even he reveals to us that it is not the socially-expected route. Mindon has been disgraced by his wife and unappreciated by his family for years. He has a right, as does any other person, to be happy, and we root for him as he claims independence. Readers are led to imagine a world where those obligations and limitations on freedom did not exist and hope that Mindon can achieve in reaching it. In spite of this, Wharton creates a symphony of characters that call Mindon back into the roles he wishes to escape.

This way in which Wharton reinforces these social expectations could hardly be any more direct. In the final chapter of the short story, Mindon is interrupted from his solitude by

three associates who quite literally serve as a collective social consciousness to halt his plans of deserting his family. Consequently, this also halts his pursuit of happiness through attaining an individual identity. The men are introduced as Laurence Meysy, a “specialist” (350) at repairing “injured husbands and imprudent wives” (351); Ezra Brownrigg, Mindon’s “uncle and senior partner” (351); and Reverend Doctor Bonifant, the “rector of the New York church in which Mindon owned a pew that was almost as expensive as his opera box” (351). Up until this point, we had never heard any mention of these three men or their relation to Mindon. This collection of characters seems to magically appear to “come to have a little chat” with him after hearing from Millicent (351), asking how he means to proceed (352). In reality, they mean to check his desire for an escape and convince him to stay, utilizing a variety of tactics that reinforce values of their social circle.

Rather than having Millicent come to Mindon herself, Wharton enlists these men to do the talking on the wife’s behalf. This is an intriguing choice for her characters to make and seems to be yet another way in which Wharton demonstrates the power of greater social forces, rather than purely domestic or personal ones, in controlling the fate of the story. Rather than having Mindon talk to Millicent, who has hurt him on an extremely personal level, Meysy, Brownrigg, and Bonifant voice extremely social reasons to entice him back to his identity with Millicent and his identity within the greater mechanizations of society. Furthermore, it’s possible that Millicent’s passivity could be an attempt at demonstrating she is willing to accept a more active role from Mindon in the future, as a type of peace offering to entice him back into the social order before he truly exits it.

As men uninvolved directly in the situation, however, Mindon’s late-night visitors list off that his decision would be bad for “publicity,” “prejudicial to a man’s business interests,” and that it would be harmful for “the children” (353). They play with his lack of certainty, impelling Mindon to assert himself and his decision: “I mean to divorce her” (353). The fact that Mindon

can hardly get the word “divorce” out of his mouth until they force him to emphasize the social stigma surrounding it. Nevertheless, this has a back-firing effect to their cause. If anything, their challenge encourages Mindon on his quest. He finally has an audience that cares about the choices he makes. When they say that Millicent wants him to come back, he finally feels “equality” with her (351) and a “thrill of pride at her efficiency” in sending the men after him (352). This audience of peers provides him finally with the sense of respect and a sense of concern from both the group and his wife that he never felt before. He feels that “their mere presence was a pedestal for his wrongs” (353). Like a child that acts out for attention, Mindon is empowered by their disapproval and declamations.

However, the group continues to insist that his choices are, in fact, still wrong. The final blow they deal is to say to Mindon that Millicent doesn’t intend to announce the news of his departure. They tell him, “[I]t rests with you to proclaim that you’re no longer – well, the chief object of your wife’s affection” (354). The men claim that Mindon will have “created the situation by making it known” and that he’s “the only one who can make [him] ridiculous” (354). The trio seems to insinuate that it is in his power as a man to maintain or break his own social reputation. Because his situation hasn’t yet been discovered by the greater social circle, he still is able to remain within its bounds, if he wishes.

Mindon still holds steadfast to his decision, until they mention the children again and how they will fall into “the shadow of obloquy” (354), just as they begin to leave. It’s not so much their arguments that make Mindon reconsider but his losing an audience. In coming to try to persuade him against his desire to leave and seek a respected identity, they gave him one. Consequently, as they leave him, his newfound confidence appears to depart, as well. Wharton writes:

In another moment they would be gone, and with them Mindon’s audience, support, his confidence in the immutability of his resolve. He felt himself no more than an evocation

of their presence; and, in dread of losing the identity they had created, he groped for a dedaining world. (354)

The three men leave him through the hotel door with ghostly echoes of their earlier reasons against leaving Millicent, and Mindon feels compelled to follow: “He fell back, letting the older men pass out; but, turning as though to follow, he felt a drowning clutch upon his arm... ‘It’s for the children,’ Mindon stammered” (354). Although he cites the children as his reason for deciding to return to his family and give up his notions of escape, Wharton hints that it is actually due to greater causes. Rather than being pleased about embracing a fatherly role and helping keep his daughters from shame, Wharton shows us that he clearly feels repressed, as though he were “drowning.” The imagery of death and suffocation invoke a sense of hopelessness, indicating that Milton’s entrapment will most likely bring him anything but happiness. Additionally, the dragging “clutch” reveals how he truly is being forced back to a role he no longer desires. Ultimately, the men and the social conscience they represent threaten Mindon with taking away the voice he has recently found. As for Mindon, whose desire was to be heard and understood, his resolve cannot exist without someone with whom to share it or against whom to defend it.

Wharton shaped the story so that we would root for Mindon and his notions of escape towards a sense of respect and freedom, but she ultimately drags him back into the claws of social restriction he sought to escape. He is ensnared by his prescribed social identity within traditional marriage, and this entrapment prevents him from finding happiness as an individual being, free of obligation. This type of ending is ultimately dissatisfying not only for Mindon but also for readers.

### Chapter 3

#### **“Atrophy” and Conversation as Means of Social Reinforcement**

Although “Atrophy” was not published until relatively late in Wharton’s writing career, it still reflects the same socially-limiting atmosphere as many of her earlier short works, particularly in regards to marital restrictions. In “Atrophy,” we are introduced to Norah Frenway, a cautious woman whose husband and family are domineering, powerful, and ill-natured. Although she has found solace and completeness in her secret extra-marital relationship with Christopher over the past few years, she hasn’t dared to leave her husband, who would surely win custody of their children. Wharton begins her story as Norah ventures to Christopher’s house for the first time in years upon hearing news that he is deathly ill. While she expects to see him for what may be the last time, she does not expect a confrontational encounter with his doting sister, Jane Aldis. Norah must battle between her secrecy and her desire to see her true love on his sickbed and is met with unusually forceful antagonism from Jane, who, in keeping things cordial, reveals that she may know the true nature of the relationship and most likely does not approve. In the end, Norah is denied entry to see her beau, and she is forced to accept the devastating consequences.

Wharton once more intricately lays out her character’s internal desire—to be with the dying man she loves—in a way that makes it possible to sympathize the choices she has made in contrast to surrounding social codes of behavior, which look down upon her extra-marital relationship. This time around, those familiar social codes are ultimately reinforced in a more subtle, yet equally tragic way—through sub-textual communication. Wharton, who has been known to “[record]... customs” of a culture or social group and form a “science of manners” in her texts (Bentley 48), shows how such good manners, related to proper social conversation can

be used to communicate multiple levels of meaning. Norah's uncertainty in the situation leads her to make assumptions about Jane's knowledge, impacting the way she communicates, reacts, and interprets the exchange. In this case, Wharton presents us with a character who attempts to use socially accepted means (in the form of small talk and appropriate conversation) to gain access to the desires of her inner, private self. Norah finds out the hard way that entrance to desires that err against judgments of the social structure that surrounds her cannot be granted. Wharton ultimately reveals through this story that communication is a strong component of social norms, unveiling how conversation itself can serve as a greater, impermeable barrier between the individual and what society permits him or her to have or become. This reinforcement leads yet again to the protagonist's entrapment in an unhappy situation, almost creating a death of identity.

### **Desire for an Escape towards Love**

To begin, Norah Frenway's desires in Wharton's "Atrophy" appear to be somewhat multi-fold. She has already acted upon some, in seeking out a more caring romantic partner than her husband, but is unable to fully reach others, such as being with Christopher completely or being able to see him now that he is ill. Unhappy in her marriage with George Frenway, whom she describes as "half-invalid" and "irascible" (187), Norah has already sought out the comforts of a true and loving relationship. Christopher, her long-time lover, is described as "the one who had lived in her soul" (189), which demonstrates the personal value of her relationship with him. While it appears that Norah would love nothing more than to dash "off down an unknown road with Christopher" (188), her husband's family keeps her from fulfilling this dream. Although an escape from his "prying envious sisters and the terrible monumental old chieftainess, her mother-in-law" would be ideal for Norah, she knows that "her husband's family was so strong, so united – when there was anybody for them to hate – and at all times so influential, that she would have

been defeated at every point, and her husband would have kept the children” (188). Although Norah is willing to break boundaries and enter into extramarital affair, she makes it clear that her “children are [her] religion” (188) and that to lose them, even if it meant being with Christopher, would be to throw herself into “an abyss” (188). Thus detained from true freedom and happiness beyond the “[p]oker playing, smoking, cocktail drinking, dancing, painting, short skirts, bobbed hair, and the rest” of the behaviors allowed to “modern” women of this time (187-188), Norah, cautious and secretive, wishes to keep her relationship with Christopher hidden and protected at all costs. Although she is willing to scoff at other women who act modern but secretly subscribe to social standards, this desire for secrecy and value of her children reveals that Norah hasn’t fully escaped the grips of societal norms, herself. Through this description of the modernized woman, who is still not fully free, Wharton reveals how, although socially acceptable behaviors have broadened, society is still unwilling to accept behaviors that transgress marital norms. The institution of marriage and the familial roles that are granted by it still serves as a barrier to a truly individualized identity, in Norah’s case.

In spite of this all, Norah now is willing to risk her secrecy by “traveling to Westover” (187), where Christopher resides, to be at her lover’s side. Upon hearing news that he is deathly ill, her new ultimate desire is to come to his aid, or at least see her lover for one last time. Now, nothing “mattered except the one overwhelming fact which had convulsed her life, hurled her out of her easy velvet-lined rut, and flung her thus naked to the public scrutiny” (187). All that she wishes, more than anything, is to be with Christopher, as made evident by her daydreaming of a scene of bonding with his sister and caretaker, Jane Aldis, and being rushed to his room and his side (189). Despite how understandable her desire to see Christopher may seem, as Wharton presents them to us, they are not going to be fulfilled without challenge.

### **Acknowledgement and Concealment**

These challenges to Norah's desires come from both internal and external factors that seem to claim her desires as being "wrong" or contrary to accepted social propriety. Norah appears to be very aware that her actions regarding Christopher, past and present, would fall under adverse judgment by society. She thinks, "What nonsense to pretend that nowadays, even in big cities, in the world's greatest social centers, the severe old-fashioned standards had given place to tolerance, laxity and ease!" (187). Although there are endless stories in newspapers and novels that treat scandal and divorce as topics of excitement, the reality of her situation is that traditional marriage and familial roles are still a primary values. Real woman in this city and time were really just "as cribbed and cabined as beset by vigilant family eyes, observant friends, and all sorts of embodied standards, as any white muslin novel heroine of the [1860's]!" (187). While Norah recognizes this hypocrisy of the greater social context, she is unable to do anything about changing the situation in her own personal relationships. She sees the forces of social norms at work in the world but believes herself to be beyond them:

Not that she was a woman to be awed by the conventions. She knew she wasn't. She had always taken their measure, smiled at them – and conformed. On account of poor George Frenway, to begin with... But it was chiefly on account of the two children that she had always resisted the temptation to do anything too reckless. (188)

However, as previously mentioned, just because she can identify limiting restrictions doesn't mean that she truly has surpassed them. Norah's paranoia on the Pullman car as she travels to Westover exemplifies this further. Wharton writes, "Cautiously, again, she glanced about her to make doubly sure that there was no one, absolutely no one, in that Pullman whom she knew by sight" (187). Norah is very aware of "the public scrutiny" that may come if her affair is somehow discovered (187). In a similar way, Norah is also overly-concerned about reading looks that

people give her. Norah recounts when an acquaintance first shared the news about Christopher: “Gladys Brincker, in speaking of Christopher’s illness, had looked at Nora queerly, as though suspecting something. But no – what nonsense!” (189). She tries to convince herself that her secrecy has paid off, but when she eventually arrives at Christopher’s home, she cannot help but sense that his sister sees through her guise “as if her breast were a pane of glass through which her trembling palpitating heart could be seen as plainly as holy viscera in a reliquary” (189). Because the third-person narrator has limited perspective, only granting access to Norah’s thoughts, we don’t know if Jane actually can read Norah’s true motives. Be that as it may, in feeling transparent, Norah is reflexively viewing and judging herself from Jane’s point of view—and the point of view of the greater social body, which is bound to judge her.

Furthermore, the awkwardness of the situation once she is greeted by Jane strongly confirms the taboos and consequences of Norah’s romantic actions. They don’t know each other well, and Norah’s visit is apparently uncomfortable even for them both. Even though Jane is “old” and has “hair untidily pinned up,” and whose “eyelids, always reddish, were swollen and heavy” (191), Norah knows that the other woman holds power as a potential agent of social reinforcement. While Norah initially describes her as “defenseless,” she still marks Jane as “an adversary” (191). The narrator shares Norah’s too-late realization:

No doubt it would have been much more politic to establish an intimacy with Jane Aldis; and today, how much easier and more natural her position would have been! Instead of groping about – as she was again doing – for an explanation of her visit, she could have said: ‘My dear, I came to see if there was anything in the world I could do to help you’.  
(191)

Instead of having situated an appropriate relationship with Jane, Norah becomes part of the uncomfortable greeting of two near-strangers, who are both potentially aware of Norah’s indiscretions, highlighting the impropriety of her actions.

### **A Web of Words: Entrapping the Protagonist**

Although Jane Aldis is just one person, and not a collective group of people, the social subtexts through her quiet confrontation keep Norah from accomplishing her desire and reinforce societal boundaries. Rather than directly addressing or confronting Norah's indiscretions, Jane plays along the lines of falsely civil, polite conversation, with only underlying insinuations, to keep Norah in check. Because neither Norah nor the readers can read Jane's thoughts, and neither woman directly addresses their true emotional states, there is a certain atmosphere of doubt and confusion that envelops the exchange. Norah appears to pick up on many nonverbal clues that suggest her interpretation of Jane's position is correct, though; even if she is wrong, her own internalized interpretation of the situation is still enough to make her feel punished for having deviated from marital norms. Although Norah ultimately guides herself towards unhappiness, the conversation with Jane gives her many hints to steer her on her way. In many of her texts, Wharton reveals how conversation can serve as an agent of the greater "social body" (Knights 29). In a combination of words and gestures the women avoid directly addressing the true subtext of the situation—that Norah loves Christopher and that Jane doesn't want her, as his lover, to see him. The smooth confrontation between the two women provides an almost even crueler result for Norah at the end. Not only is her lover dying, but something as simple as conversation is enough to keep her from obtaining her desire of being at his side, causing a similar death-like experience in her, as well.

Norah, who had not been expecting such an icy reception, is at first shocked that the weary sister of her lover could be appear to be so potentially venomous:

Was it possible that she and that woman had sat thus facing each other for half an hour, piling up this conversational rubbish, while upstairs, out of sight, the truth, the meaning

of their two lives hung on the frail thread of one man's intermittent pulse? She could not imagine why she felt so powerless and baffled. (193)

Norah begins to feel that Jane must know or suspect Norah's true reason for visiting and true relationship with Christopher. More than that, if that is the case, it is clear that Jane doesn't approve, otherwise she would make it easier for Norah to see her dying paramour. Interpreting Jane's conversational roadblocks as a type of social rejection, Norah begins to feel that Jane "must hate" her (194).

Wharton depicts an interaction layered with sub-text underneath the actual conversation. Although nothing is said outright about Norah's true reason for being there, or Jane's disapproval of Norah's relations with her brother, it gradually becomes apparent to Norah. Jane speaks "in a cool, detached voice" while exchanging false and tired pleasantries (191). These include continuously bringing up Norah's husband, his "tree moving" interests (192), and asking why Norah is in the area. It is possible to interpret these behaviors as Norah does—as evasive tactics to avoid the real situation at hand and to keep Norah at a distance. Norah makes an excuse about visiting an "old governess who lives" nearby and thought to stop by on behalf of both Frenways (192), but soon guesses that Jane intends to do anything *but* "extend to her visitor the decent shelter of pretext" for being there (192). The conversation seems to transform into a battle or race between the two women to gain a lead and communicate their actual meaning (for Norah, that she must see the man she loves; for Jane, potentially that she cannot allow such a scandalous interaction to take place) without directly revealing so to one another. Wharton writes:

...[S]he found it more and more difficult to regain a lead in the conversation. And the minutes were slipping by, and upstairs the man she loved was dying. It was absurd and lamentable to make a pretense of keeping up this twaddle. She would cut through it, no matter how. (193)

While Norah wishes to “say something to save the precious minutes that [remain] and break through the stifling wave of platitudes which her enemy’s tremulous hand was weaving around her” (194), Norah is unable to break past the social barriers that she believes are entwined within their chat. She views Jane as her enemy, but she cannot “win” unless she breaks out of the conventionality of the exchange first.

The conversation becomes a way of trapping Norah into the expectations of society. These civilities are almost an offensive social attack from Jane, at least from Norah’s perspective, geared to keep Norah’s unacceptable behaviors in check. Jane uses conventional social conversational words and phrases to help lock Norah, immobile, in a web of propriety to keep her from seeing Christopher at this time. Since Norah is the one who had broken past socially acceptable behaviors by engaging in an affair with Christopher, she cannot hope to win the conversational battle on socially acceptable terms. The only chance she could have would be to admit, out loud, the true reason for her visit; however, Norah is also caught in a web of her own discretion. Having already told lies about why she is visiting (192), she remains stuck within them. Furthermore, there’s no way of knowing how Jane might react to a direct confession. Although her desire to see and help Christopher is her current primary desire, she knows she must still try to be cautious and keep the affair a secret, at risk of her husband finding out and her children (who are, again, her “religion” (188)). So long as Norah wishes to keep her relationship a secret from her husband, she cannot address it directly, and the social context seems to work this to its advantage. Because she still subscribes internally to some of the social limitations around her, Norah ends up trapping herself with her antagonistic interpretation of Jane’s actions. Norah is therefore kept from outwardly admitting to actions between her and Jane’s brother and kept from seeing him.

When Norah is about to ask Jane if she’s willing to tell Christopher she’s there, it becomes easy to see that Norah’s perspective might just be valid. Exemplifying this, Jane re-

frames the situation in her own terms, most likely revealing sub-textually that she cannot permit this improper romantic relationship to continue:

‘Tell him now that you called to inquire? How good of you to think of that too! Perhaps tomorrow morning, if he’s feeling better.’

Norah felt her lips drying as if a hot wind had parched them. They would hardly move. ‘But now – now – today.’ Her voice sank to a whisper as she added: “Isn’t he conscious?”

‘Oh, yes; he’s conscious; he’s perfectly conscious.’ Miss Aldis emphasized with another of her long pauses. ‘He shall certainly be told that you called.’ Suddenly she too got up from her seat and moved towards the window. ‘I must seem dreadfully inhospitable, not even offering you a cup of tea. But the fact is, perhaps I ought to tell you... You ought to be at the station by four o’clock at the latest; and with one of those old Junction taxis...’ (194)

Jane’s words appear to immediately mark her as an agent of social reinforcement in this story. Norah recognizes that she is “being delicately dismissed” (194), and finally feels in absolute certainty that Jane knows “everything” of her affair with Christopher (195). For Norah, this final verdict from Jane is more than just being sent away from Westover; she feels “[d]ismissed from life – from hope – even from the dear anguish of filling her eyes for the last time with the face which was the one face in the world to her!” (194).

Norah’s pain is evident, as she draws in “a quick sob” (195), but the conversation with Jane enacts social reinforcement upon Norah. Jane keeps pushing her out of the house, calling her a taxi, so that she may be “on time” for the departing train (195). Wrapped within the conversational limits, and being forced out of the house, Norah reacts to this punishment for offending social order strongly. The way in which she describes it is almost like a typical “tunnel” description of someone who is dying or close to death:

The smooth slippery floor of the hall seemed to Nora to extend away in front of her for miles. At its far end she saw a little tunnel of light, a miniature maid, a toy taxi. Somehow she managed to travel the distance that separated her from them, though her bones ached with weariness, and at every step she seemed to be lifting a leaden weight. (195)

Furthermore, although that were not bad enough, the final line of the story is Jane bidding Norah a cold farewell, saying, "I'll be sure to write and thank Mr. Frenway" (196). On top of the pain of her lover dying and being denied access to him, Norah now must also deal with the consequences of her secret being uncovered by her husband.

In *Norah*, Wharton shapes a woman who is stuck in various situations that ultimately will keep her from finding happiness. Her husband's family seems oppressive, and it becomes easy for readers to understand why she would seek out a loving relationship with Christopher—a relationship that she doesn't seem to have with anyone else in the world, aside from her children. Readers can understand her adherence to her role as a mother, and we can see how her relationship with her children would be threatened if she left George Frenway or took her relationship with Christopher too far. The fact that Norah only really mentions her children briefly shows that her value of them is in fact a manifestation of her internalized awareness of social norms. Now, in addition to being limited with her relationship with Christopher, it's even more tragic that Christopher is dying. Not only is her lover's imminent death punishment enough, but there also is the aspect of social punishment. Not only is she about to lose someone she loves, but thanks to Jane's formal choice to stick to restrictions of social propriety, she also will not be allowed to see him one last time.

Although Christopher may be dying physically, the suppression of Norah's desires through social reinforcement causes a similar, death-like reaction in her. Although she is supposedly being turned out for engaging in an extramarital affair, the affect it has on her "kills" her almost as effectively as sickness is killing Christopher. While Norah had gotten away with the

affair with ease for years, Wharton at last seems to heap social consequences upon her. After experiencing the threatening politeness of Jane, readers can witness the deaths of one character, a relationship, and an internalized identity.

## Chapter 4

### Irony and Parallel Situations in “The Reckoning”

In “The Reckoning,” Wharton explores yet another way in which social reinforcement of traditional values can occur—even long after the initial boundary-breaking choices have been made. The female protagonist of this story not only got a divorce and remarried in the past, potentially walking the line of social disapproval, but also went so far as to create the framework for a new vision of marriage that certainly counters what is typical or expected. Although the character’s “main” choices to act out against social norms took place in the past, she is still rendered unhappy—this time, through events that ironically mirror her past divorce, only leaving her the victim this time around. Years before the story’s action takes place, the protagonist, Mrs. Julia Westall, had divorced her previous husband, John Arment, with a new vision of marriage in mind as a way to justify it. When she married her second husband, Clement Westall, ten years ago, it was with a new commandment and vision in tow, in which being “faithful” means being faithful to your own, individual feelings (47). She and Westall had agreed that, should either of them desire to leave the marriage, the other would honor that decision and allow a divorce to occur without stirring up any legal trouble.

While Julia had originally been the one to keep these values instilled in their marriage, and Westall had been reluctant to share these views with others, there has since been a reversal of roles when the story opens. Julia finds that, having found happiness in her marriage with Westall, she no longer subscribes whole-heartedly to her previous ideas. However, “[of] late... [Westall] had shown a puzzling tendency to dogmatize, to throw down the gauntlet, to flaunt his private code in the face of society” (47). Although Westall claims to have good intentions in this

attention-seeking behavior, Julia suspects that the young, impressionable, and pretty Una Van Sideren may be playing a role in his sudden change of heart. Westall eventually reveals that he wishes to get a divorce and leave her for Una. Contemplating the irony of her own norm-bending views destroying her happiness, Julia can't seem to see where she went wrong in her second marriage. She seeks out her first ex-husband, Arment, with hopes of obtaining his forgiveness when she realizes that he must have experienced a similar lack of understanding that she currently feels.

Moving away from situations like those in "The Line of Least Resistance" and "Atrophy" in which other characters help enforce societal restrictions of protagonists' desires, "The Reckoning" provides an example in which an individual can become implicated in creating their own ultimate unhappiness through reinforcement of social norms. In this particular instance, Wharton's short story portrays how a woman, whose earlier decision and views pushed past typical social boundaries, eventually falls prey to the bent barriers she had altered for herself, revealing an ironic and vindictive nature to the collective social order that Wharton shapes.

### **From Changing Tradition to a Change of Heart**

Once more, Wharton opens the story long after the original act against social norms and took place. With this in mind, her current desires are closely tied to actions she had taken to pursue her previous ones. While Westall once sought a divorce and ideological revolution in regards to marriage, Wharton reveals that Westall now wishes to revert back to traditional views, revealing the temporal nature of individual desires in the face of long-standing social institutions like marriage. It becomes clear through the narration that Julia Westall has already, in the past, obtained a divorce and has been remarried to her second husband for the past "ten years" (51). In this case, though, it is not so much her divorce and remarriage that Julia flaunted in the face of

society but rather the values she claimed to have altered in order to justify them. Julia, in the past, desired to validate her actions with a platform of ideals that were radically different from traditional views of marriage and divorce in the first place. Wharton writes, “Julia had long had her own views on the immorality of marriage; she might indeed have claimed her husband as a disciple” (48). For Julia, marriage appears to be merely a social contract, rather than a deep bond that comes with its own rights and wrongs. This viewpoint shows how marriage serves as a regulating agent of social norms; while many people view it as being the “right” thing to do, Julia, in acknowledging its immortality, is instead able to identify it as a purely social institution. Accordingly, the Westalls were founded upon Julia’s new commandment: “The marriage law of the new dispensation will be: Thou shalt not be unfaithful – *to thyself*” (47). Rather than being a moralized, normative social contract, Julia is able to frame it along terms of two individuals. She had entered a type of contract of her own into their marriage arrangements: to “keep faith with themselves, and not to live together for a moment after complete accord had ceased to exist between them” (54). Wharton further reveals that Julia had been the one to keep this ideal prominent throughout their marriage: “That was in the first burst of propagandism, when, womanlike, she wanted to turn her disobedience into a law” (48).

Now, however, it becomes evident that Julia has transformed since then. The happiness she has found in her marriage with Westall has caused her to turn back on her previous views. She had once been the one to keep the ideas present, “but she had long ceased to feel the want of any such ideal standards, and had accepted her marriage as frankly and naturally as though it had been based on the primitive needs of the heart, and required no special sanction to justify it” (51). Julia knows she is turning her back on her old views, conforming to traditional views on marriage arrangements. This surprises her, and when reflecting on her critical comments to Una, she claims that it “was as though someone else had been speaking – a stranger who had borrowed her own voice: she felt herself the dupe of some fantastic mental ventriloquism” (49). Wharton reveals

that Julia has had a change of heart and now desires secure stagnancy in her current marriage arrangement, wishing to protect her old views from falling into the hands of those who may not be as principles as she claims she used to be. Wharton writes, “Now she felt differently. She could hardly account for the change, yet being a woman who never allowed her impulses to remain unaccounted for, she tried to do so by saying that she did not care to have the articles of her faith misinterpreted by the vulgar” (48).

While Julia at last seeks to keep the revolutionary views quiet, her husband is just finally finding confidence in them and is beginning to publically exalt them. Wharton writes, “He had been... almost pusillanimously careful not to let his personal views endanger his professional standing. Of late, however, he had shown a puzzling tendency to dogmatize, to throw down the gauntlet, to flaunt his private code in the face of society” (47).

All Julia appears to desire now is for her husband to stop pandering her sacred ideals and for the two of them to continue their lives as in simple, socially-acceptable roles as a content and typical married couple. Although Julia knows first-hand the restrictions and the true, contractual nature of marriage, thanks to her first with Arment, her change of heart with Westall reveals that sometimes happiness can stem from even an arbitrary, normative system. For, as Julia thinks, “[i]n the ten years of their marriage, how often had either of them stopped to consider the ideas on which it was founded? ... The foundation is there, of course – the house rests on it – but one lives abovestairs and not in the cellar” (51). She wants to forget about her past’s unruly, impassioned “cellar” and let their current marriage be. She also wants to protect their marriage, considering Westall’s speeches make her feel as though he speaks of their own marriage like it’s “the wrong kind,” or the kind from which she had previously broken away (56). Ultimately, though, it seems that her previous desire, actions, and ideals which, as we will examine, clearly contested the usual, are determined to haunt her.

### **Radical Change in the Face of Social Flexibility**

Rather than examining why Julia's current desires are "wrong" in the eyes of the public (since her present desires follow more traditional values, and are only "wrong" in the eyes of her past self and husband), I will instead look into the social response to the sequence of events and ideals that lead Julia to the current place of action. For instance, one of the more interesting aspects of this story is that Julia's first divorce actually had public support, which might suggest that her actions were not, in fact, against the norms and traditions of society. However, upon a closer look, we can see that the circumstances in which the approval of her divorce and subsequent remarriage was given too subscribed, in a way, to the restrictions and allowances of society at the time. Furthermore, it then becomes evident, even to Julia, that the idealistic, radical views that she used to tailor this first divorce into something valid and reasonable in her own heart are, in fact, what were deemed potentially destructive and unreasonable to traditional social norms. Her change of heart away from her previous principles reveals their inherent, boundary-crossing nature.

To begin, in regards to her first marriage, the narrator makes it clear that society had actually accepted her original divorce, on grounds that John Arment was not granted acceptance into the greater social context to begin with. Wharton writes:

If there be a distinction in being misunderstood, it was one denied to Julia Westall when she left her first husband. Everyone was ready to excuse and even to defend her. The world she adorned agreed that John Arment was 'impossible,' and hostesses gave a sigh of relief at the thought that it would no longer be necessary to ask him to dine. There had been no scandal connected with the divorce... (52)

Since John has been cast out and classified as "non-existent" member of the social "tribe" (Preston 5), Julia's break from him was easily viewed as understandable by it. Furthermore, the

narrator claims that because she hadn't met Clement Westall until after the first divorce, and since he was less wealthy than her previous husband (meaning she wasn't just in it for the money), nobody objected to her second union, either (Wharton 52). However, this very description implies that there is an inherent social disapproval when it comes to divorce and remarriage. Had Arment been a well-liked, easygoing member of society, or had she left Arment specifically for Westall, Julia's decisions easily could have been scandalous.

In spite of this, it appears as though this social acceptance hadn't been enough for Julia. She had to make her divorce and remarriage stand on a platform of ideals in order to justify it all—mostly to protect herself. With her second marriage, and its contract, “the door of divorce stood open” and “no marriage need be an imprisonment, and the contract therefore no longer involved any diminution of self-respect” (54). Julia herself seems to acknowledge the radical views she has taken to justify her first divorce. The narrator says, “The exchange of these vows seemed to make them, in a sense, champions of the new law, pioneers in the forbidden realm of individual freedom: they felt that they had somehow achieved beatitude without martyrdom” (54). The fact that these thoughts are “forbidden” and that they felt like they were “pioneers” necessarily implies that they have gone beyond the typical range of socially acceptable behaviors and thoughts.

Later, now that Julia has been happily married under these ideals that gave her past actions meaning (even when no explanation to society was needed), she has grown overprotective of them because she thinks others will misinterpret them or take them too far. She describes the Van Sideren couple as those who view “audacities...as artistic” (47). The fact that they encourage her husband to give his talks at their studio implies that Julia's previous tenants are, in fact, still audacious to the typical public view. Her discomfort for her husband's speeches has just as much to do with her desire to protect her marriage as it does to protect other people, who may be less principled as she believes herself to have been when she first subscribed to them, from misusing

them. The narrator claims that “she did not care to have the articles of her faith misinterpreted by the vulgar” (48).

However, her husband feels that her new desires are absolutely wrong since they contradict to her previous beliefs. This puts a selfish spin on the way in which she wielded their ideals in the past and in how she now wishes to leave them behind. Westall challenges her by saying, “What you mean is that, the doctrine having served your purpose when you needed it, you now repudiate it” (56). Julia replies in exclamation, “Well... what if I do? What does it matter to us?” (56). Unfortunately, Julia is too late in protecting others—and herself—from her boundary-breaking former views, which do matter more to her husband now than ever.

### **Unhappiness from Ironic Reinforcement**

As the story reaches its end, it becomes clear that Julia is indeed going to become a victim of her own untraditional, past ideologies. Having once decidedly abandoned society’s typical views towards marriage, she is now prevented from maintaining happiness within this contractual institution. Even though she may reach some resolution after talking to Arment, she still is trapped with her unhappiness. Her past justifications for divorce ironically resurface in a parallel situation, only leaving her in the role of the abandoned, confused spouse this time around. Westall soon reveals that he is not willing to stop giving the talks or drop their foundational views of their marriage from conversation. After Julia asks him to stop giving talks, Wharton writes, “[h]e combined a man’s dislike of uncomfortable questions with an almost feminine skill in eluding them; and she knew that if he returned to the subject he must have some special reason for doing so” (50). Julia fearfully and jealously brings up Una Van Sideren into conversation, and the effect his speech had on her. When Julia questions Westall’s familiarity with Una’s habits, he responds, “I should like to be [familiar with her]... She interests me” (52).

It isn't long until Julia deduces that her husband means "to claim fulfillment on [her] promise" to release him from their marriage (56):

'You intend to leave me, then?' she said at length.

His gesture seemed to deprecate the crudeness of the allusion.

'To marry someone else?'

Again his eye and hand protested. She rose and stood before him.

'Why should you be afraid to tell me? Is it Una Van Sideren?'

He was silent.

'I wish you good luck,' she said. (57)

In reality, though, Julia does not take this news as calmly as she appears. When he first tells her of his intentions, "[f]or an instant the room wavered and darkened; then she recovered a torturing acuteness of vision. Every detail of her surroundings, pressed upon her: the tick of the clock, the slant of sunlight on the wall, the hardness of the chair arms that she grasped, were a separate wound to each sense" (56-57). The suffocating reaction she experiences is a physical manifestation of her entrapment, much like Mr. Mindon's sensation of drowning. Likewise, similar to Norah Frenway of "Atrophy," Julia and her identity seem to waver with this horrible news in a death-like experience. Wharton writes, "She looked about her, trying to recover her hold on reality. Her identity seemed to be slipping from her, as it disappears in a physical swoon" (57).

What is more, she recognizes the irony that she is the one who brought this unhappiness upon herself. While "ten years of happiness with Westall" had developed "a reversion" in her views (54), her earlier insistence in them offered Westall the escape she had once claimed from Arment herself. The narrator says, "It was as though some giant machine of her own making had caught her up in its wheels and was grinding her to atoms" (58). Julia becomes the victim of her own boundary-breaking views. Social norms are reinforced when her boundary-breaking views

turning against her. She is not allowed back in to the social system; after rejecting the institution of marriage in the past, she can no longer break back into the social order she destroyed for herself. She is denied a happy marriage, and the end result is not pretty for Julia. She realizes that “[s]he was the prisoner of her own choice: she had been her own legislator, and she was the predestined victim of the code she had devised. But that was grotesque, intolerable – a mad mistake, for which she could not be held accountable!” (58). Her mistake of going against societal norms with her radical views cannot be altered at this point.

In this short story, though, the narrative does not end immediately after her rejection from the greater social context. Julia is given options, realizing that “[t]he law she had despised was still there, might be invoked... invoked, but to what end? Could she ask it to chain Westall to her side?” (58). She decides to pay a visit to her ex-husband, Arment, who might have perspective to share, considering he went through a similar situation. She realizes, though, that she could not subject Westall to such difficulties or entrap him herself, and talks out her uncertainty with Arment:

You saw that the law couldn't help you – didn't you? ... That is what I see now. ... He leaves me because he was tired... but I was not tired; and I don't understand why he is. That's the most dreadful part of it – the not understanding... I see now that you didn't understand – did you? (63)

She asks Arment for forgiveness, for having caused him the pain and confusion that Westall is now causing her. While Arment tells her that “[t]here is nothing to forgive” (63), at least opening up for possibility of hope for closure, it is clear that Julia still must now end up in an unhappy situation, opposite of the happy marriage she wanted.

As readers, we are led to hope for Julia's happiness. Wharton crafts the story to make it understandable to see why Julia would want to leave Arment and pursue a marriage that allowed certain measures of freedom with Westall. Although it may have been a bit hypocritical of Julia

to support the revised marriage commandment in one situation and desire to abandon it in her new marriage, her happiness seemed to vindicate this hypocrisy. Wharton forms a space where we can see the advantages of Julia's divorce, remarriage, and also her principled views in the face of society's expectations. In that sense, it's tragic to see how her own principles, which she hadn't even needed to form in the first place, since she already had general support from society, came back to haunt her and render her the victim this time around. Wharton's ironic and merciless reinforcement of social norms, by making Julia's earlier contrasting views harm her in the end, makes for yet another frustrating finale. Although Julia is at least able to gain some form of understanding of the greater situation by visiting Arment after Westall chooses to divorce her, it becomes difficult to ignore the sad, ironic end for the character.

## Chapter 5

### “Autres Temps” and the Unforgiving Social Memory

If the previous short stories exemplify the different ways in which social reinforcement can take place and impact an individual, “Autres Temps,” then, serves as an example of the never-ending, unforgiving nature of such reinforcement and reaction. Rather than society pulling her back to entrap her, it’s keeping her out when she seeks re-acceptance. In this case, the protagonist has already endured one dose of entrapment and comes to relive the experience anew, many years later. We are presented with the story of Mrs. Lidcote, a woman who has been in exile and been the face of public scandal for the past “eighteen years” (121). She has long-since fled New York society after being spurned and shunned, presumably for divorcing and possibly remarrying. Lidcote is now, at last, returning to New York where her own daughter, Leila, seems to be following in her footsteps by remarrying after a recent divorce. Although her old friends, Franklin Ide and Susy Suffern (not to mention Leila herself), continue to assure Lidcote that “things are different now” (123), Lidcote persists in mistrusting everyone and feeling as though she is being judged and ostracized.

Regardless, her friends continue to try to convince her otherwise, especially considering the fact that Leila, whose crimes against social order are the same as her mother’s, is perfectly accepted into society at the present. Ide, especially, has motives to make Lidcote feel welcome and content, since he has romantic feelings for her that she may even reciprocate. Readers are left to question whether Lidcote is just being paranoid, trapped in the social mechanizations of her painful past, or whether she actually is still looked down upon in society. However, evidence slowly mounts supporting the latter case. While Lidcote desires to believe that her friends are

right and that there is hope for her to re-enter New York's social circles, the ending, in which Ide himself eventually dissuades her from meeting with old friends who held prejudices against her, revealing that while times have changed for others, Lidcote's past actions against societal norms are not yet forgiven.

In "Autres Temps," Wharton presents us with a character who severely tempted to desire happiness and social acceptance once more but ultimately is denied access to a comfortable identity within society on account of her past actions. While it is difficult to step beyond the borders of social limits, this story exemplifies that it is just as tricky to re-enter after having previously escaped. Although Lidcote secretly envisions an escape from the walls of shame which have built up around her for years after initially transgressing social norms, by the end, her entrapment within them is reinforced once and for all. Incorporating elements of shame and a lack of forgiveness, Wharton shows how the social structures surrounding her characters may be impermeable once trespassed.

### **Hope for Reconciliation**

Once again, the protagonist's primary actions that went contrary to social custom (getting a divorce and possibly remarrying—although it is never explicitly said throughout the narrative) have taken place in the past, marking her as an outsider from the membership of the social collective. However, this time they have taken place so far back that her daughter is of age to be making the very same choices—a fact that impacts Lidcote's current desires and actions. In the story, Lidcote's past is one that haunts her, as the narrator makes evident in saying, "[T]he week at sea had given her too much time to think of things and had left her too long alone with the past. When she was alone, it was always the past that occupied her" (120). Since Leila herself is in the process of "divorce from Horace Pursh and remarriage with Wilbour Barkley" (120), and Lidcote

believes that scandal from divorce is now not just her “own past but Leila’s present” (121). She can’t help but fear that her daughter, too, will be shunned and shamed as she was.

Wharton seems to ascribe Lidcote several key desires that drive her forward now—the first and foremost of which is to be there for her daughter, not just as a mother, but as a “warning” (121). She doesn’t want “New York saying with one voice: ‘Yes, Leila’s done just what her mother did. With such an example what could you expect?’” (121). Although she had not been present for much of her daughter’s life due to her self-imposed term as an expatriate in Italy, she still hopes to have some sort of role in Leila’s life. Lidcote expects that this role as a warning of the dangers society can bring to those who divorce and remarry, but since she has been so absent, she mostly wants to be “needed” and appreciated somehow by Leila (127).

In order to do this, it becomes apparent that Lidcote must face the “unreasoning terror” that comes with returning to a New York that has previously been trained to hate and disrespect her (120). She feels that “New York was the sphinx whose riddle she must read or perish” (122), revealing the existence of intricate social norms and patterns of behavior that must be followed in order to gain acceptance. What is more, Lidcote must confront the “imagery of exposure” that she experiences (Raphael 319), or the paranoid way in which she takes in her surroundings and those around her who she feels judge her. This type of imagery first appears on the boat that takes her back to New York from Europe. Old acquaintances on the same vessel, the Boulgers, start out acting friendly towards her. However, once they learn she is “*the Mrs. Lidcote*” (120) she feels that their attitudes towards her grow significantly colder. Lidcote knows that much of her doubt is internal but can’t help but feel it from external factors, anyway. She knows that “it might really be that Mrs. Boulger had not meant to cut her, but had simply failed to recognize her” (121). Regardless, Lidcote appears accustomed to expecting others to expect the worst from her. Because the narration style is third-person limited, it is just as hard for readers to tell, at first,

whether Lidcote is actually experiencing such rejection or simply projecting it upon her interactions with others.

Additionally, after avoiding the company of New York society for years to escape its negative judgments, Lidcote surely must want to believe what Suffern, Ide, and Leila try to convince her. She desires to believe that the “boundaries of society” have indeed expanded and that opposing traditional marriage isn’t looked down upon (123). In fact, she does become convinced that everything with Leila’s situation at least is stable and acceptable. She learns that there are “no bad feeling [s] between Leila and her ex-husband (129) and that many feel “every woman had a right to happiness and that self-expression was the highest duty” (126). This change of state for Leila offers Lidcote the opportunity to hope for re-entrance into a society that once rejected her for her scandalous divorce.

At a secondary level of desire, Lidcote also struggles with her wish to romantically be with Ide, who expresses his feelings for her after many past opportunities after they reconnect on the boat and during her New York visit (128). Ide is the one person with whom “she could think and feel and behave like any other woman” (122). However, we see again and again that Lidcote is trained to shield herself from expecting kindness or compassion. She has been hardened by past mistreatment towards her and seems wary of making herself vulnerable to more potential scorn or pain. The narrator claims, “His attitude allowed her to imagine that compassion was not the basis of his feeling towards her, and it was part of her joy in his friendship that it was the one relation seemingly unconditioned in her state...” (122). This potential romantic connection would offer her another route to happiness, in addition to being welcomed by Leila and re-instated into the social order.

By returning to New York, she is making herself vulnerable to the “surprises and inconsequences” that the “present and future” offer (121)—in other words, her return to New York, and the differences she finds there, allow her to hope that she, herself, may reconciled with

society. Lidcote begins to entertain the lightest, most fleeting hope that “Leila’s folly had been the means of vindicating hers” (130), in spite of feeling “irrational resentment” that this vindication hadn’t come sooner (131). However, she is not willing to throw herself wholeheartedly into this idea that her past is now forgiven, and as is soon revealed, she may not be incorrect in her defensive nature and interpretation of the imagery of exposure.

### **Public Scandal and Personal Shame**

Wharton gives evidence in the form of Lidcote’s exile to show that her past actions were considered to be indiscretions and that she is “right” by social standards to be experiencing shame. Cynthia Griffin Wolff defines this sense of shame in an introduction to Lev Raphael’s book about the complicated psychological experience in Wharton’s works:

Shame is essentially interpersonal: it is the effect of emotional injury, defeat, humiliation, and derisive isolation when on or more of these experiences has become internalized.

Thus, a person will experience shame whenever convinced that she or he has been seen in a painfully diminished way. (Griffin Wolff xii)

Having fallen from the good graces of society away of escaping the constant negative emotion from external, social factors was to physically isolate herself from it. When others created her story into a scandal, Lidcote chose to run away rather than fight the shame that others made her feel. Not only does she go into “exile” to escape to judgment for it (Wharton 120), but the way in which Wharton describes the situation truly puts it into perspective:

During her long years of exile she had made her terms with it, had learned to accept the fact that it would always be there, huge, obstructing, encumbering, bigger and more dominant than anything the future could ever conjure up. And, at any rate, she was sure

of it, she understood it, knew how to reckon with it; she had learned to screen and manage it and protect it as one does an afflicted member of one's family. (120)

It is easy to see that Lidcote had undergone an intense process of shaming by society. While she is able to “manage” it, it is still there, ever-present, like a shadow on her consciousness and the way she feels others perceive her. By leaving for Italy all those years ago, she seems to empower this shame imposed upon her by society. Rather than staying to fight it or defend herself, she allows it to affect her to the point that she leaves her life and daughter behind on account of it. Clearly, Lidcote has lived many years experiencing an internalized sense of shame such as this, based on the way that her rejection and “social condemnation” from her formal social circle (Raphael 97). Otherwise, she would not have felt the need to remain exiled, or warn her daughter away from potentially experiencing such shame, as well.

Furthermore, she later calls her situation a “disastrous experiment” and “long-past rebellion” (121). This terminology of failure, in which she describes her ordeal as a battle with all of “New York” rather than just a singular person or group (122), also reveals how powerful the judgments of the social collective can be. It's not just a specific friend or two that rejects her. It's the entirety of the embodied social presence of New York itself. By associating the social context with a geographical location, Wharton is able to further exemplify why Lidcote had to escape one in order to escape the other—attempting to flee from her shame by fleeing from New York.

### **Truth Confirmed through Ashamed Associates**

When Lidcote first arrives back to New York, she is given many opportunities to believe that her desire for re-entry into society may manifest. She is on good terms with Suffern, Ide, Leila, and even members the youthful New York generation. She is welcomed to her daughter's home by the young people and even befriends Charlotte Wynn (131), the daughter of one of her

own old friends, Margaret. However, the old New York still hasn't forgotten her—nor she it. In spite of all the insistence that she is simply being paranoid or not letting the past go, several instances indicate that her shame is not simply imagined—that the imagery of exposure is actual exposure. Although we don't have access to the other characters' thoughts, we can interpret their actions independently of Lidcote and reach similar conclusions. It's not enough that Lidcote has already been shamed in the past; she continues to be judged and overlooked, particular when others reveal that they still, somehow, feel slightly ashamed of her.

In the afternoon of her arrival to her daughter's estate, after the younger generation leaves, Lidcote feels as though she is expected to *not* come down to tea, which all the “older set” and her “contemporaries” will be attending (133). She has been convinced to believe that it's all to help her rest from her journey and that it is “cozier for [her] to stay” in her room (134). Yet, when she mentions to Susy that she wouldn't mind seeing “The Ashton Gilles” (134) or the “Boulogers” (135), driven by her sudden burst of new confidence in her situation, Susy lets out a gasp (134). Noticing that something is off, Lidcote asks:

‘Do they know I'm here by the way?’

The effect of her question was to produce in Miss Suffern an exaggerated access of peering and frowning. She twitched the tea things about, fingered her bugles and, looking at the clock, exclaimed amazingly: ‘Mercy, is it seven already?’ (135)

Suffern rushes out with excuses and is soon replaced by her daughter. If Suffern's avoidance and nervous behavior isn't enough, it soon becomes possible to discern that Leila shares Suffern's feelings about having Lidcote down to dine with her future in-laws and other older members of New York society:

As she [Leila] paused, the color stole over her bare neck, swept up to her throat, and burst into flame in her cheeks. Thence it sent its devastating crimson up to her very temples, to

the lobes of her ears, to the edges of her eyelids, beating all over her in fiery waves, as if fanned by some imperceptible wind. (137)

These two physical reactions by Susy and Leila reveal their sense of shame towards her. Raphael talks about the physical “affects” of shame, as described by Silvan Tomkins, a renowned psychologist and an expert on shame (Raphael 3). This includes changes in breath, skin pigmentation, and overall expression (Raphael 3-4). It is possible to interpret Suffern’s gasp and Leila’s blushing as evidence of them feeling a sense of shame towards Lidcote, or fear that she will cause them to feel shame if the visiting “older crowd” does not approve of her. Even though Lidcote is hurt by her daughter’s sudden change of heart and apparent shame of her own mother in such company, Lidcote backs down and renounces her desire to go downstairs. She continues to protect her daughter by keeping herself hidden and not interacting with her peers, who still she feels do not approve of her.

This apparent confirmation of her shameful presence in New York leads to her painful decision to return immediately “to Italy” (Wharton 137), which shocks her daughter and especially Ide. While Lidcote packs on a following day, she tells Ide that Margaret Wynn, Charlotte’s mother, passed by her and seemed to scoff at her. Ide continues to insist that she is being ridiculous, and that things have changed. He claims that he doubts that the insult was “simply imagined” (140), and tries to keep her from packing her things by expressing hope of his own romantic intentions with her. Ide claims she never “put [her old peers] to the test” to see if their opinions towards her had changed (142), since she hadn’t gone down to tea or bothered to stay with Leila longer.

Hoping to believe him one last time, but testing the vision he presents, she offers to “go down and see Margaret Wynn,” as he seems to encourage her to do (142). Now that she has changed her intention, though, Ide struggles to change her mind from meeting the Wynns, making various excuses (143). He cannot hide the truth from Lidcote again, though:

Her hand dropped from the door, his dropped from her arm, and as they drew back and faced each other she saw the blood rise slowly through his sallow skin, redden his neck and ears, encroach upon the edges of his beard, and settle in dull patches under his kind troubled eyes. She had seen the same blush on another face, and the same impulse of compassion she had then felt made her turn her gaze away again. (143)

This second blush, mimicking Leila's, reveals the truth. However, Wharton's characterization of Lidcote's reaction as having "compassion" reveals that Lidcote is able to understand, in spite of how dejected she may feel, and wishes to protect them from feeling pain or shame as she does. Determined to leave in order to achieve this, Lidcote continues to pack, once more rejected from acceptance in the New York social sphere. She holds on to the shame that has been internalized within her. "We no longer have to suffer real defeats, rejections, or failure" Raphael writes, "just perceiving events in these ways or even anticipating failure can confirm our sense of shame" (8). Unfortunately, Wharton confirms that Lidcote's shame isn't just a self-fulfilling prophecy. It exists and continues to be placed upon her from external vantages as well as internal. Her situation has lived up to all the negative expectations she had envisioned, even in spite of having gained hope.

This form of social reinforcement is quite tragic, since Lidcote had been offered such an idealistic alternative to her accustomed shame but is still kept in the prison of societal judgment that has been crafted for her years before. Lidcote explains to Ide, "We're all imprisoned, of course – all of us middling people, who don't carry our freedom in our brains" (141). It's also crucial to note that although times have changed for Leila, society is too stuck in the "tradition" of rejecting her to forgive her (141). She adds, "It's simply that society is much too busy to revise its own judgments. Probably no one in the house with me stopped to consider that my case and Leila's were identical" (141). Lidcote now feels trapped once and for all within the "little tight round of habit and association" and has lost "any illusions" she ever had "as to an angel's

opening the door” (141). She acknowledges that she is trapped by the unchanging social structures that surround her unique case and is rendered hopeless, unable to dream or desire of an escape any longer.

In *Lidcote*, Wharton presents us with a character who is very aware of and even able to articulate the cruel, vindictive nature of social enforcement. The shame felt by Lidcote and by others is a force that cannot simply be erased by time. This shame has become a part of her identity, is acknowledged internally and externally, and her social reputation is beyond saving because of it. This is especially tragic, considering it is too late for her to be spared from shame for actions that her very own daughter is applauded for in present times. Wharton shows us a social spectrum that knows no forgiveness once trespassed, even when logic would encourage it. She depicts a social barrier surrounding marriage norms that do not permit re-entry.

## Chapter 6

### “The Long Run” and Ingrained Social Identity

In this short story, Wharton explores how a protagonist can outwardly become an agent of social forces against himself. At the start, an unnamed, first-person narrator returns after twelve years abroad to New York—and to the tragic story of his old friend, Halston Merrick. He is shocked to see how Merrick has changed from the vivacious, creative man that the narrator last saw. While Merrick had once been a “vivid and promising figure in American life” (144), he has now “grown conventional and dull,” which the narrator considers to be “something dreadful, unforeseen, unaccountable” (146). Although the main action of the story has since passed, Halston pulls the narrator into the past, describing his intense relationship with the once-brilliant Paulina Trant (now Paulina Reardon). The two young characters had connected on a level beyond what they’d ever experienced before. For Merrick, who had previously been down on his luck, Paulina was an inspirational Muse, a dear friend, and a potential lover. He tells the narrator just how she revived his life with joy, saying that “she flashed with prismatic fires” (152).

However, when Paulina suddenly and assuredly makes moves to leave her husband, the “gray” and dull Philip Trant and move in (152), Merrick shockingly finds himself discouraging her from her decision and turning her away. Acting in what seems to be direct contrast to his desires and what is best for the continuation of their relationship, Merrick himself voices the opinions and views of a rigid society. It becomes clear that the pursuit of true love, in their case, would go against conformity and tradition—which Merrick is reluctant to do. While he tries to frame his argument around theoretical men and women, ultimately, he is actually caught between the dichotomies of an individual and group identity. Paulina seems to argue that love itself can

overcome any social repercussions that might be thrown their way, but Merrick won't allow himself to accept her perspective.

While other protagonists in Wharton's stories also internally reveal their dependence on social structures, Merrick comes to explicitly embody and voice the restrictions and norms of society prescribed within an individual piece within it. The social boundaries regarding marital (and even extra-marital) norms are so ingrained within Merrick's consciousness that he is unable to surpass them and find happiness. In denying the social experiment that their relationship would have become, he dooms himself and Paulina to dull, painful, and regretted futures—the present at which the narrator finds himself encountering these two changed characters.

### **An Escape from Discontent via Relationship**

As the story unfolds, we can see that Merrick desires an escape from an unfulfilling lifestyle by pursuing a relationship with Paulina. The narrator shares that, in the past, Merrick had inherited an Iron Foundry from his father and was obligated to take over the family business in spite of being a promising figure in literary society (144). This limitation of his professional opportunities in turn appears to seep into his own personality. While he had once been “handsome” with a “charming smile” (145), Merrick admits that being forced to run his father's company had run him ragged and filled his heart with “discontent” (151).

However, Paulina Trant soon enters Merrick's life. He tells the narrator that “suddenly she stood out for me” (151). Wharton paints a picture that makes it clear that Merrick and Paulina are both extremely compatible and happy together. She revives his life and personality, inspiring him as a “Muse” to write and truly feel once more (150). She brings color to his dull life, and he clearly wishes to hold on to the “heightened emotion” he feels around her (152). He even describes in it artistic terms, depicting a party at which the only true company the two characters

keep is one another. He tells the narrator, “We knew that they [all others at the party] were just painted in, and that the whole of life was in us two, flowing back and forward between us” (151). Not only is Paulina his Muse; she is also a close friend with the potential for being a lover. Merrick explains, “Love is deeper than friendship, but friendship is a good deal wider. The beauty of our relation was that it included both dimensions. Our thoughts met as naturally as our eyes: it was almost as if we loved each other because we liked each other” (153). This description allows us to see that this relationship is one he values and also one that he desires to build upon.

Merrick appears to be content with their undefined state until he realizes that Paulina is not truly his own, even if they are two of a kind. Merrick gets angry at Paulina’s nonchalance as she shares that she and her husband are preparing to leave on an extended trip together (154-155). At last, in attempt to pursue his desire for happiness through his relationship with her he demands that they decide how they want to continue. “You understand,” Merrick tells her, “...that we can’t go on like this?” (155). Merrick knows that they have reached a crossing, where they must either become romantically involved or cease their friendship altogether. He says, “For the first months friendship sufficed us, or rather gave us so much by the way that we were in no hurry to reach what we knew it was leading to. But we were moving there nevertheless, and one day we found ourselves on the borders” (154).

In response, Merrick writes to Paulina, asking her to visit before she departs on her journey, and when she does, he shares, “I forgot everything but the bliss and wonder of her being there... I lifted my head and our eyes met. Hers were smiling” (156). He clearly wants to be in a romantic relationship with her and maintain the bliss that she brings to his life. While his heart has guided him to this point, however, Wharton shows that to proceed any further is not going to be so simple.

### **Doubting Desire**

Unfortunately, as he sees his very desires unfolding before him, Merrick begins to reveal that he may not be able to act independently of the greater demands of his social surroundings. He is able to acknowledge the potential wrongness of his desires in pursuing a married woman. Before either of them can act upon their desires to be together romantically, Merrick still recognizes the lines that are being crossed with his friendship with Paulina. These relational boundaries first surface when their time together is threatened by the extended trip between Paulina and Trant (154). At that point, Merrick still seems willing to risk the consequences of rejecting social propriety. It is not until Paulina arrives at his house, and tells him that she's packed a trunk (157), indicating that she means to stay, that he realizes the risk she is taking and starts to doubt the situation. Merrick is a man on the edge, but he is unwilling to jump off without a second thought. At this particular point of the novel, Paulina seems more certain than Merrick about proceeding. Upon seeing his surprise when she tells him her packed luggage is on its way, she warns him, "I haven't come for a night; if you want me I've come for always" (157).

Paulina is willing to wholly commit to him and is asking the same thing of him in return. With this heartfelt proposal of sorts, Paulina is offering Merrick a way to happiness and sharing that she reciprocates his emotions. However, Merrick is hesitant. He claims that it wasn't out of fear for his own reputation that he feels put off by her forwardness, but rather fear for her own: "I knew she couldn't come to my house without running a big risk of discovery, and my tenderness for her, my impulse to shield her was stronger, even then, than vanity or desire" (157). Nonetheless, his continued tale leaves many clues to question his position as a reliable storyteller. It appears that, in their case, to pursue love at all costs is necessarily to act out against social unity. If they truly wish to be with one another, they must be willing to accept potential shame and anger that society will place upon them, as we have seen Wharton demonstrate in the other

short stories. Standards of propriety regarding traditional married relationships may contrast with Merrick and Paulina's options, and we can see how his position has been conditioned by his surrounding social structure into viewing their relationship as being something wrong.

### **Conflicting Discourses: Gender Roles versus Social Space**

The way in which Wharton presents their continued confrontation reveals the depths of his entrenchment in the social values that surround him. Although Merrick is telling his side of the story to the narrator, an old friend, Wharton leads us to question the true nature of his motives. As Merrick's conversation with Paulina goes on, he argues on various points as to why it might be a bad idea for her to suddenly leave Trant for him. Although it appears that discomfort with gender expectations in this given situation takes precedence in his mind, Paulina tries to show him that the true problem lies within the greater social context. She believes they must set themselves apart as individuals, characterized by their love rather than by identities shaped by social conformity. While Merrick believes he is making arguments about "Man and Woman," Paulina knows that the case is actually about whether they are willing to step out as separate entities or whether they will conform to gain acceptance from the rest of society. Rather than viewing marriage within gender roles, as Merrick does, Paulina's version, which is ultimately admitted to be correct, confirms that marriage is merely a social tool to restrict relationships. Merrick's attempt at reframing the situation to issues of gender falls flat, as even he hints at underlying, greater social repercussions throughout his narrative.

To begin, the question of gender roles within this social order to which Merrick has unknowingly subscribed clearly comes into play. Paulina, the woman, has suddenly appeared with this very forward, avant-garde proposal to advance their relationship forward, to a state never before approved of in social settings. Paulina makes her decision not in a flurry of

overwhelming, rash, female emotion, but in a solemn, calm manner, which Merrick cannot easily reciprocate. He says, “It was like her, if she gave at all, to give not furtively or in haste, but openly, deliberately, without stinting the measure or counting the cost” (156). She offers to not only enter into an affair with Merrick but to leave her husband entirely for him, apparently living with him before any divorce or remarriage proceedings can take place. In a sense, Paulina’s offer to stay “for always” (157) is a type of proposal marriage (or rather, anti-marriage) proposal. Since men traditionally are the ones to make this move, it is very possible that Merrick is threatened by her usurpation of his masculine expectation to propose. More than that, he reveals that feels concern for her and is shocked to sense that she is making suggestions that lie “outside” of typical views of society (158).

Because of this threat to his honor and position of superiority as a man, he eventually doubts her “perfect moral honesty” (163). While he claims to understand her positions, Wharton gives evidence to the contrary. Instead of acknowledging what she says, he chooses to remain chivalrous, in line with what he considers to be a “superior masculine experience” (163), to try to set her right. As he tries to come up with ways to get her home to Trant without raising suspicions, he tells her, “It’s my duty, dearest, as a man... The more I love you the more I’m bound—” (157). Paulina, though, interrupts and acutely notes that he doesn’t “understand” (157). He also makes the excuse that he would feel as though he had “taken advantage of her” (163) if he accepted her offer, when in reality, Merrick cannot let go of the potential consequences of their actions. Furthermore, although Merrick claims that “there wasn’t... at the moment, a grain of selfishness, of personal reluctance, in my feeling...” (157), he later contradicts himself when he admits to the narrator that he thought of “the popular conviction (which I confess I shared) that when a man and a woman agree to defy the world together the man really sacrifices much more than the woman” (160).

With this sudden offer from Paulina, Merrick finds himself falling away from the pursuit of his own desires and actions that may be best to preserve his relationship with Paulina, instead thinking and voicing the concerns of those beyond his own self and identity. He realizes the impact of his reaction, but is unable to alter it:

Such an act of romantic folly was so unlike her that it almost irritated me, and I found myself desperately wondering how I could get her to reconsider her plan with – well, without seeming to want her to. / It's not the way a novel hero feels; it's probably not the way a man in real life ought to have felt. But it's the way I felt – and she saw it. (157)

He tries to argue with theories about their gender roles within tradition and society, but Paulina is the one who insists that they are not and do not have to follow stereotypical rules—of gender or any other category society may offer. “This thing between us,” Paulina tells him, “isn't an ordinary thing” (158). She tries to convince Merrick that their relationship goes beyond expectations of men and women—that it goes beyond the true nature of fear of social rejection that underlies his concerns. Regardless, Merrick is not able to move away from conceptual social arguments about “Man and Woman” to the specific “you and me” that Paulina acknowledges (160).

It is interesting to note that it's not so much entering into a forbidden relationship or affair with her that causes him discomfort; it's more so the fact that she wants to leave her husband for him altogether. In fact, Merrick makes it seem that to have an illicit affair would be more socially acceptable than what Paulina is proposing they do. It is this passage that reveals that his argument is truly framed from the point of view of overall social concern, rather than just gender roles:

...I had always looked on our love for each other, our possible relation to each other, as such situations are look on in what is called society. I had supposed her, for all her freedom and originality, to be just as tacitly subservient to that view as I was: ready to

take what she wanted on the terms on which society concedes taking, and to pay for it by the usual restrictions, concealments, and hypocrisies. In short, I supposed that she would ‘play the game’ – look out for her own safety, and expect me to look out for it. It sounds cheap enough, put that way – but it’s the rule we live under, all of us. An the amazement of finding her suddenly outside of it, oblivious of it, unconscious of it, left me, for an awful minute, stammering at her like a graceless dolt.... (157-158)

Unlike Paulina, Merrick is only able to work within the framework that society has already provided for him. This limitation keeps him from seeing Paulina’s suggestion as anything but a potential disaster. He cannot change his conditioned way of thinking, even when Paulina begs him to think of “what [their] love would become if [they] had to keep it apart from [their] lives, like a pretty useless animal that [they] went to peep at and feed with sweetmeats through the cage?” (159). She tries to make him see that a secret affair would kill their love and newfound happiness, and that to make this bold move in the face of society, empowered by their love, would be the only way to make “their lives enlarged, and not diminished, by their love” (159). Paulina’s words reveal that, for her, to enter into a secret affair would ruin what they have. She tries to convince him, saying:

Why, to do it would be to admit that our life, yours and mine, is in the people about us and not in ourselves; that we’re parasites and not self-sustaining creatures; and that the lives we’re leading now are so brilliant, full and satisfying that what we should have to give up would surpass even the blessedness of being together! (162)

She is able to see how social norms work their way into relationship expectations, but believes there love must reject them entirely in order to survive. While Merrick would be willing to enter into an affair with her, for Paulina, the only “[o]ther way” they could preserve the integrity of their deep relationship, aside from living together would to end their relationship altogether. Like scientists testing a hypothesis, they must either take a chance together or “abstain and refrain; and

then see what [they] become, or what [they] don't become, in the long run, and draw [their] inferences" (162). Paulina tries to convince him that there is no middle ground—that to not commit to their relationship entirely would be better than only committing to it in secretive terms, under the control of social norms.

At the same time, even as Merrick tells his story, it is clear that Paulina's interpretation of motives is correct. The true undercurrent of his concerns seems to lie with sacrificing social acceptance, rather than sacrificing his masculine role within their relationship. Merrick reveals that fears that they would have to drop "out of [their] social setting" and face scandalous consequences from society (160), claiming it's for her sake. Paulina insists that this wouldn't matter to her, adding that his own, true literary "ambitions," which would propel him away from unhappiness at the iron works, "are of a kind that won't be harmed" by leaving society behind (160). Since writers often work in solitude, he could almost benefit from being excluded. Merrick, for just a moment, feels "a fierce kind of joy in following her" even "through [his] anguish of resistance" (159), and knows that she has a sort of "unfaltering logic" (161). Despite this, he still chooses the second course of action—to halt their relationship entirely. As he turns her down for the ultimate time, Merrick knows that "the end had come" (164). Afterwards, he tells the narrator that he lost all of his inspiration, and loses the ability to be creative or truly happy (164).

Over the years, Merrick tries to convince himself that she had known he would turn her down and had wanted to give him "a pretext, a loophole an honorable excuse, for doing and saying – why, precisely what I had said and done" (165). However, he finds that his "theories crumbled under the test of time" (166). Merrick knows now that "her insight had been deeper and keener than" his own back during their great confrontation (165), and is forced to live with regret stemming from his inability to overcome social expectations. As he tries to come up with reasons and excuses for why he turned Paulina down, really, his choice revealed, as she insinuated, that

he was unable to surpass the social expectations that society imposes upon his identity. He realizes this, he reveals, “I had to justify my great refusal, and I tried to do it by plunging myself up to the eyes into the very conditions I had been struggling to get away from” (164). Merrick embraces the dull social order that brought no color or vivacity to his life, much to his unhappiness. He is full of “bitterness,” and it becomes clear that Paulina now is “awfully different” (147), as well— “faded” (146), as the narrator described her before hearing Merrick’s tale. These transformed-for-the-worse characters are the ones that the narrator now meets, revealing that Merrick’s choice ultimately was the wrong one in the long run. We know that this negative change of heart goes beyond just Merrick’s self-perception, since the first-person narrator and friend is able to observe the changes in Merrick, as well. Having an external perspective in the form of the narrator, who is merely hearing his story, can confirm that Merrick is indeed entrapped by his own actions and suffers for it.

The part of this story that makes it even more tragic is that they could no longer return to the point of friendship they once had. More than this, they now interact with one another within that social sphere, as though their potential break past it had never even happened. Paulina’s new husband, Reardon, whom she married after Trant passed away (166), even gets along with Merrick. Meanwhile, because of his ingrained social mindset, Merrick lost any shot at true happiness, love, and individuality he ever had. He is stuck within the social order that he allowed to overrule his desires, not only ensnaring himself in a downward spiral, but Paulina, as well. She is no longer the brilliant woman he once knew, which makes the situation even more painful and tragic. Merrick tells the narrator at the story’s end on page 167, “The long run – well, we’ve run it, she and I. I know what I’ve become, but that’s nothing to the misery of knowing what she’s become....”

## Chapter 7

### Conclusions

After examining the various methods through which Edith Wharton characterizes the way in which marriage serves as a normalizing social construct throughout several key short stories, displaying the power of the greater social order, it becomes clear that the impact of the contrast between creating sympathy for the protagonists and denying them their happy endings can have a very polarizing effect on readers. The tragic entrapment of characters at the end of these stories can leave readers with an unsettling feeling of something being unfulfilled or unfinished. Having explored the broad path through which this effect can be achieved in regards to marital normativity, we can now examine the effect these outcomes have on readers.

On one hand, it is possible that readers can simply find a reaffirmation of the limitations of society in these pieces of short fiction. This interpretation would take a fairly negative approach towards encountering social orders, in which characters are victims, absolutely unable to escape or go beyond the dictations of a given society to achieve their desires or find happiness in relationships. If this thematic expression is expected to reflect real life, it would seemingly serve as a reminder that people should “keep to their place,” and not bother trying to escape the boundaries of society since it is ultimately capable of repressing any sort of dissent or rebellion.

However, the above interpretation is a slightly pessimistic and negative approach to take. It is possible that, although the protagonists of these particular short stories by Wharton are unable to escape the dominant social reinforcement, the slightly depressing effect it has on readers may be anything but a call for acceptance of given circumstances. In fact, it is arguable

that there is almost an opposite effect, and that it could be a useful tool to spark further challenge against that which limits happiness.

As humans, we naturally seek resolution and closure, often preferring happy endings with neatly-tied loose ends to those that challenge or frustrate us. While obviously tidy, neat solutions are far from realistic or expected, in worlds both fiction and real, this fact doesn't stop us, or characters, from seeking them out anyway. Therefore, when these characters with whom we can sympathize are denied these neat solutions, readers can become frustrated once more at the limits that are reinforced against the assumedly undeserving. This frustration is to be aimed not at Wharton herself, for designing these unfortunate circumstances, but at the circumstances of social limitation which she realistically depicts. The ways in which she creates sympathy for her characters, and negatively portrays the social situations that eventually entrap them, raise awareness of the present strength of these very social formations.

In each of these stories, which span several decades, we see characters who continue to try to fight against social boundaries until they are finally broken down by them. While they may not all be successful in the end, the fact that so many of her characters undergo this process reveals that, no matter what, there will always be those who continue to try to fight against forces that keep them from finding happiness, which is at least a hopeful if not successful type of resistance. Rather than praising these restrictive social forces, the disappointing nature of these endings allows for readers to continue to call them into question, even if the characters were not successful in surpassing them. Furthermore, while we don't see successful resistance from characters in these five particular stories, we can still arrive at this more optimistic conclusion, especially when taking a look at other Wharton short stories in this same context. Not all of her shorter pieces are so bleak in aspect. For example, there are a handful of stories, including two of her most popular pieces – “Roman Fever” and “The Other Two”—that exemplify exceptions to entrapment in unhappy marital normativity.

In Wharton's "Roman Fever" a woman who had an affair with a cruel rival's current husband before their marriage, now is able to subtly boast of having had the superior daughter by him. Although she does not get to be with him, she is able to surpass her ill-intentioned rival to achieve happiness with her current family (n. pag). In "The Other Two," we meet a man who is his wife's third husband. Although he initially must deal with handling discomfort at interacting with her previous husbands, by the end of the story, all four characters are able to get along civilly and happily (31), proving that happiness can be found even in the face of multiple, scandalous relationships. These are two of the stories that occupy the most attention from literary scholars and popular readers in general. This is because, by the end of these stories, we are presented with a view in which social boundaries have been surpassed, offering a more straightforward critique of the limitations that they present—and a positive outcome.

We can read a different vantage point in these types of Whartonian short stories at which to study and possibly rally against social limitations. Even the frustration and unsettling natures of unhappy endings provide a platform from which people or characters can either give up completely or move forward, continuing to pursue their desires, regardless of the hand dealt to them. Rather than giving her characters a victory, Wharton crafts a sense of disappointment with the status quo that may encourage greater reader focus on critique of tragically-enforced traditional viewpoints on concepts like marriage, divorce, and love that span from the early 1900s to today. It is just as easy to see how some of Wharton's short pieces too are characterized by limiting social atmospheres and trapped characters, just like with her novels. It is possible, through these pieces and others alike, to learn to acknowledge unjust social limitations and to continue to challenge them rather than to blindly sit back and accept them.

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