CHAPTER II
SECTION 1
The House of Mirth

_The House of Mirth_ (1905) narrates the story of twenty nine year old Lily Bart whose reputation declines because of the rapid social changes. Beautiful but poor she is in need of a rich husband to ensure her position among the social elite and to support her expensive habits – which include fine clothes, charities and gambling. Unwilling to marry without both love and money, she fails to find a man who can provide both. In this search, a slight indiscretion on her part makes her a target of slander. She meets with one failure after another culminating in utter social degradation and ultimate suicide. In registering the decline of an intelligent and honest young woman, Edith Wharton captures the rapid transition of a society and its deteriorating values governed by economic determinism. “Each of Lily’s confrontations with her emerging consciousness, each of her bouts of honesty, leaves her a little more brittle, a little more vulnerable to destruction by a society which regards departures from the tribal rules, and honesty, as weaknesses and exploits them to her disadvantage.” (Lawson, 34)

We shall now attempt an analysis of this novel in terms of the categories formulated in Chapter I. Psychic structure of the family is the corner-stone of Mark Poster’s critical theory of the family. He writes:
The family is thus the place where psychic structure is formed and where experience is characterized in the first instance by emotional patterns. The function of socialization is clearly implied by this definition, but the family is being conceptualized not primarily as an institution with the function of socialization. Instead it is the social location where psychic structure is most decisively prominent (143).

The clue to the mind and character of Lily, the heroine of the novel, can be readily detected in her upbringing in a bourgeois nuclear family. She was what she was because of the way she was brought up by her parents. "Sons and daughters of bourgeois families learned that the fulfillment of all wishes depends in reality on money and position" (Poster, 55).

**Upbringing**

Upbringing contributes to the psychic structure of the family and its members as posited by Poster. Lily was brought up by an indulgent, hardworking, rich father and an ambitious mother who believed in fashionable social life. Her childhood was characterized by high fashionable life as described below by Edith Wharton:

A house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was 'company'; a doorbell perpetually ringing; a hall-table showered
with square envelopes which were opened in haste, and oblong envelopes which were allowed to gather dust in the depths of a bronze jar; a series of French and English maids giving warning amid a chaos of hurriedly-ransacked wardrobes and dress closets; an equally changing dynasty of nurses and footmen; quarrels in the pantry, the kitchen and the drawing-room; precipitate trips to Europe, and returns with gorged trunks and days of interminable unpacking; semi-annual discussions as to where the summer should be spent, grey interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense – such was the setting of Lily Bart’s first memories (25-26).

Until her teenage, Lily’s life was crowded with parties, visits, European travels, holidaying during summer and similar amusements. At eighteen, her debut in society as a young woman was a glittering and expensive affair despite growing financial problems. There was always a perpetual need of more money. Hudson Bart, the father, was always blamed for the deficiency. “She knew little of the value of money.” (28). Lily’s mother kept up the appearance of fashionable life despite diminished financial resources. Her friends appreciated Lily’s mother for her ability to manage with lesser means and termed her action heroic.
They were totally ruined when Lily was nineteen. Mr. Hudson Bart, Lily's father was bed-ridden. “To his wife he no longer counted: he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfil his purpose, and she sat at his side with the provisional air of a traveller who waits for a belated train to start” (29). However, the death of Mr. Hudson Bart made matters worse and, drove them from pillar to post. The state of mind of Lily's mother as expressed below was crucial to both the women: “Only one thought consoled her, and that was the contemplation of Lily's beauty. She studied it with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance. It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt” (30).

Lily had no idea of a life other than that of the fashionable leisured class. In fact, she was trained to hate the dingy life of her rich cousins, poverty, and working class life. She had acquired from her mother a taste for fashionable life. It was an expensive taste for fine dresses, charity and gambling. She was habituated to a luxurious life without the resources required for it. After the death of her parents Lily depended upon her aunt Mrs. Peniston for her periodical allowance.

Everyday Life of Lily

As discussed in Chapter I, the daily life of the family determines the character of the child. The novel covers a period of two years in the life of Lily
Bart. When the novel begins she is twenty-nine years old, a precarious age for an unmarried woman. Her daily life consisted of visiting rich fashionable people and assisting the hostesses like Judy Trenor in writing notes or invitation cards and the like. Amusement was the chief aim of the leisured class she associated herself with.

When she was in Bellomont, the country place of the Trenors, the days were spent in gossip and the evenings were spent in playing Bridge for money. Dinners were elaborate and guests were people chosen according to their rank in society. Business people like Sim Rosedale were assiduously excluded from this charmed circle of the leisured class. Depending on the season, Lily was either in the town or in the country. During the lean season, she spent her time with her aunt Mrs. Peniston.

Lily Bart's present was an offshoot of her past. She knew very well that her destiny was shaped by her early childhood and an upbringing by a fashion-loving mother.

As a kind of confessional statement to Gerty Farish, Lily traced the root cause of all her misfortunes to her upbringing: "Why, the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose – in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for." (197). On another occasion, in her conversation with Selden, Lily
declared: “but as you have always told me that the sole object of a bringing-up like mine was to teach a girl what she wants...” (46).

In a bourgeois family the child is petted like a prince or a princess. It is mostly ‘His Majesty the child’. By extension the child is fashioned and groomed to fulfil the unfulfilled desires of the parents. The mother wants her daughter or son to achieve what she herself could not achieve in her life time. In other words the mother or father or both as the case may be, live through the children. The parent wants the child to succeed on his/her behalf. The child is trained in this direction. Being impressionable, the child absorbs and adopts the ideals of the parents and works to realize them. This theory of Mark Poster is illustrated in the life of Lily Bart.

Ambitious mother as she was, Mrs. Bart was conversant with the high society of both the sides of the Atlantic. She was a snob of the highest degree. She disliked her rich relatives as they lived like pigs in dingy holes. She crammed these ideas and feelings into the heads of both her husband and daughter. She brought Lily up as a fashionable, modern, unconventional girl with cosmopolitan habits and manners. In this environment Lily picked up some bad habits too.

Lily smoked and played cards for money on Sundays too. Mrs. Peniston, her aunt and guardian benefactress was shocked to hear of Lily’s gambling
debts and announced her displeasure thus: “But I suppose it’s your foreign
bringing-up – no one knew where your mother picked up her friends. And her
Sundays were a scandal – that I know’. Mrs.Peniston wheeled round suddenly,
you play cards on Sunday?” (152).

The goal of her life was fixed. She told Selden that she wanted to be
happy. Gerty Farish, Selden’s cousin, a social worker, lived an independent
life in a small flat. According to Lily, Gerty wanted to be good. Lily did not
like to lead a free but miserable life like Gerty Farish. The goal had been set
for her by her mother. To be happy and to be free from worries, Lily thought
that she should climb the social ladder and become a member of the upper
class. The shortcut to achieve this goal was to marry into the upper class.
After the death of her father Lily’s mother fixed this goal for Lily with a
fierceness which was in inverse proportion to her dwindling fortunes. She
dreamed fervently of a brilliant marriage for Lily, but died without seeing what
was in store for her.

After the death of both her parents, Lily came under the tutelage of
Mrs.Peniston, her aunt. As a beneficiary she knew how to adapt herself to her
new circumstances. “Misfortunes had made Lily supple instead of hardening
her, and a pliable substance is less easy to break than a stiff one” (32). Her
plight as a dependant taught her the art of dealing with people tactfully. And at
this critical moment marriage was her only option.
Marriage as a Vocation

Cherlin as well as Poster stress the role of marriage in the economic and emotional well-being of a person. For a young woman without economic independence, in a bourgeois society, marriage gave economic stability. In the American society of the early twentieth century, a married woman enjoyed greater social freedom than an unmarried woman. There were fewer restrictions for her. For instance, a young woman’s visit to the apartment of a bachelor was frowned upon by polite society. Lily’s visit to Selden’s apartment was an indiscretion which cost her reputation.

Lily banked upon her beauty, charm and wit as her assets in her pursuit of a suitable life-partner. She knew that beauty alone would be inadequate and that mental gifts were a prerequisite for a successful marriage. She was also aware how she was looked upon by others. “I have the reputation of being on the hunt for a rich husband”, Lily remarked to her friend and hostess Judy Trenor (40).

She dreamed of marrying an Italian Prince with a castle in the Apennines; or an English nobleman with political ambitions. However she did not want to marry merely for the sake of money. She had a taste for higher things in life. Her passion for money was not crude. The irony of her fate was that she did not desire money alone; but she could not survive a minute without money. She threw away one or two offers of marriage early in her life.
Besides upbringing, by inclination, will and spirit Lily wanted to possess securely the joys and luxury of aristocratic life. She knew very well what she wanted. Referring to Gerty Farish in comparison with herself Lily told Selden “she likes being good, and I like being happy” (7). On another occasion she told him her conviction that her idea of success in life was to get as much as one can out of life. Obviously, she needed more money than what her aunt Mrs. Peniston gave her as her allowance and marriage to a very rich man became her urgent aim in life as she was getting older. Nevertheless, she did not want to marry for money alone as she despised the crudities and limitations of the moneyed-class. Gerty Farish, one of the admirers of Lily presents her predicament remarkably: “Lily might be incapable of marrying for money, but she was equally incapable of living without it…” (143).

The second part of Gerty Farish’s pronouncement on Lily, that ‘she was equally incapable of living without it’ clinched the fate of Lily. That apart, her mounting gambling debts, her habit of smoking, her truancy, her overconfidence in choosing and winning her partner weighed against her. Despite her beauty, charm, wit, accommodating spirit, and tactfulness in dealing with men she failed to judge the power of her enemies. Her forward manners and habits could easily frighten the rich, young, prospective husbands.

Lily’s first catch Dillingworth slipped through her hands as his mother had apprehensions about her. Her second target was Percy Gryce. She planned
and calculated every move. Judy, her friend, well-wisher and hostess of
Bellomont advised her to go slow as Percy was worth $800,000 a year. In
fact, the novel begins with her elaborate designs to ensnare Percy Gryce, who
had a partiality for his Americana collection. She collected necessary
information about Americana from Lawrence Selden. When she spotted Gryce
on the train she invited him to have tea with her and thus began the mildly
seductive game of trapping him with her beauty, charm and wit.

At Bellomont, the country place of the Trenors, Lily pretended to be a
non-smoker and avoided playing Bridge to flatter Gryce’s moral sense.
However the unexpected and sudden arrival of Selden forced her to change her
plans. Yielding to a truant impulse, Lily whisked Selden away from
Mrs.Dorset, another admirer of Selden. Dangerous and vindictive as she was,
Mrs.Dorset reacted sharply by poisoning the mind of Percy Gryce against Lily.
Despite the caution of Judy Trenor, Lily underestimated the powers of
Mrs.Dorset who played havoc in her life. Frightened by Lily’s habit of
gambling, Gryce chose to marry Miss Van Osburgh, a rich girl.

Family-Society Relation

Poster and Goode assert that society has an important role to play in the
lives of the members of a family. The upper class society plays the villain
against Lily in this novel. It was the discovery of the nineteenth century, as
some one has said, that Society, rather than God or Satan, is the tyrant of the
universe. (Blake 56) One false step of Lily in the intricate dance of getting a life partner, was a fatal step - the fatal step being her indiscretion. The American society of the early twentieth century had different yardsticks in judging what was right and what was wrong. What was right for a married woman was not right for an unmarried girl. “It all turned on the tiresome distinction between what a married woman might, and a girl might not, do” (70).

Lily’s relation with others was chiefly a social relation where she approved the women of upper strata and disapproved as well as ignored the men and women of the lower strata, until she herself was forced to climb down the social ladder very quickly after the death of her aunt Mrs. Peniston. The novel chronicles Lily’s relation with different types of men. As one on the hunt for a rich husband her target was Percy Gryce. As discussed earlier, being a woman with a fine sensibility, she could easily judge his limitations. Hence she was averse to marrying him as it would mean a life of uninterrupted boredom:

She had been loved all the afternoon by Percy Gryce - the mere thought seemed to waken an echo of his droning voice - but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all in the bare chance that he
might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life (23).

She did not understand how the rich gravitated towards people with a fortune. She ruminated thus about Percy's engagement with Van Osburgh. "Life was too stupid, too blundering! Why should Percy Gryce's millions be joined to another great fortune? Why should this clumsy girl be put in possession of powers she would never know how to use? (81).

She was foolish enough to imagine that she could break their engagement and win him back. Diana Trilling's comment is worth quoting here: "The House of Mirth is nevertheless one of the most telling indictments of a social system based on the chance distribution of wealth, and therefore of social privilege, that has ever been put on paper." (106)

There were two opposing traits in the mental make-up of Lily. Her upper class upbringing and luxurious living without the means, compelled her to marry a rich man. At the same time, her sensitive, refined tastes compelled her to put off offers and proposals from rich but crude people like Sim Rosedale or Trenor and prefer the friendship of poor Lawrence Selden a cultivated and intelligent lawyer.
When compared with the other three novels chosen for study, in this novel, Mrs. Wharton dwells more on the social aspects than the domestic aspects of the story. Barring a few events all the important scenes are scenes of social activity. The question of family implies a home. Lily has no home of her own. She is the guest of one aristocratic family or other either in the town or in the country. She is like a guest in her own aunt’s house.

One of the moving, domestic events in the novel takes place in the poor household of Nettie Struther when she takes Lily to her house. To elated Nettie, the visit of Lily is a dream come true. Nettie, her husband and her little baby form a poor but, happy family. Nettie, a woman with a past has achieved a domestic felicity which is unattainable to Lily who has the only pleasure of taking the baby in her arms and feel its warmth. It made her happy and realize for the first time the value of human fellowship, a result of an act of kindness. It was a rare and revealing moment. It revealed the uprooted life of her parents and her own past life. Mrs. Wharton describes Lily’s contemplation of her past and present thus:

And as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any personal existence to shelter them from its shifting gusts. She herself had grown up without any one spot of earth
being dearer to her than another: there was no centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others (279-280.)

The above lines hint at the values Lily's parents missed for themselves and also failed to offer their daughter - values available to one from a good family and upbringing. This loss of values is partly due to the social changes taking place during the lifetime of the creator of Lily Bart. Mrs. Wharton in her memoir *A Backward Glance* explains why she chose to write about the subject of the fortunes of a young girl in this transition period:

The problem was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another. In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the "old woe of the world," any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess. The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer in short was my heroine, Lily Bart (288).
Most of the critics, who agree with Edith Wharton read this novel as a social satire. Diana Trilling asserts that “As for Lily Bart, society poses but a single alternative to a woman, to live by its laws or die by its laws, any ingenuity that would wish to triumph over the preordained destiny is at best merely a delaying tactic” (117.)

Social Exchange Theory

Poster does not rule out economic determinism in moulding the psychic structure of the family. However there are critics like Wai Chee Dimock who interpret this novel in terms of economic exchange. Referring to Gus Trenor’s demand for Lily’s person in exchange for the money he gave her, Dimock writes:

The most brutal moment in *The house of mirth* dramatizes not so much the centrality of sex as the centrality of exchange – and legitimate – by the language of the marketplace, the language of traded benefits and reciprocal obligations ... As a controlling logic, a mode of human conduct and human association, the marketplace is everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous and invisible under its shadow even the most private affairs take on the essence of business transactions, for the realm of human relations is fully contained within an all-encompassing business ethic (123).
In the cruel world of economic exchange Lily Bart has to pay with her life at the end. Her private morality has to yield to the market place morality where she becomes a commodity.

There is yet another interpretation of her accidental suicide. Lily wanted to vindicate her innocence. She wanted to find the right word for it when her consciousness was sinking. Citing Gubar, Elaine Showalter writes: "This word, Susan Gubar argues, is Lily's dead body; for she is now converted completely into a script for his edification, a text not unlike the letters and checks she has left behind to vindicate her life" (143).

My contention is that Lily's upbringing, her everyday life, the non-availability of 'a center of early pieties' and a home and family to care for her especially at crucial moments led to her degradation and suicide. She died with the thought of warmth she received from Nettie Struther's baby. Nettie's happy family was an indirect gift of Lily Bart. In her noble death she made peace with the world—both economic and social represented by the Trenors and the Dorsets. More importantly, in her death at least, she was rightly understood by Selden whom she loved.
Edith Wharton’s examination of the condition of a young beautiful woman who wanted to rise in New York society is continued in her *The Custom of the Country* where the heroine succeeds in her ambition but fails as a human being and mother.
SECTION 2

The Custom of the Country

The Custom of the Country (1913) narrates the romantic adventures, marriages, divorces and remarriages of an insatiable young woman Undine Spragg. Finding Apex City too small with limited possibilities, she came to New York with her parents after trying a few other places. With a powerful pioneer blood in her she always wanted to “go beyond”. Once settled in New York, she quickly sensed the gradations in society, their distinct manners and languages. She wanted to get into the aristocracy, the best society she knew and read about in newspapers. She was confident of conquering it with her exceptional and arresting beauty and the help of her indulgent parents.

Soon after initiation into the New York society, her ultimate dream, she captured the attention of Ralph Marvell, an aristocrat by birth, and his friends. By watching this set closely Undine adopted their language and manners giving up her loud and dominating manners of Apex City.

Undine’s past engagements, marriage with Elmer Moffatt and quick divorce were things of the past swept under the carpet. But they haunted Undine and her parents when Moffatt resurfaced in New York. She hastened her marriage with Ralph and quickly went to Europe on a honeymoon which turned out to be a mixed bag of frustration and enchantment. She did not have
the artistic temperament of Ralph Marvell. The mountains, sky, moonlight and
churches of Siena did not interest her. His constant advice to her about her
society or curtail expenses irritated her. She succeeded in bending even
unfavorable circumstances to her advantage with her practical but insensitive
and unrefined mind and persuaded Ralph to visit St. Moritz and Paris where she
was in her elements shopping, and dancing to her heart's content. However her
pregnancy dampened her spirits.

Four years after marriage, she discovered that Ralph could never see eye
to eye with her. Ralph's earnings were always inadequate to her expensive
habits. Their son Paul Marvell was a hindrance to her love of a vain and giddy
social life of visits, balls parties and foreign jaunts. Against Ralph's wishes she
reset the engagement ring and diamond pendant, a wedding gift which were
ancestral relics preserved for generations. She had to dissemble, deceive her
husband who became more and more suspicious of her, particularly in her
relation with Peter Van Degen, his cousin's husband. Her busy social life
prevented her from attending her son's birthday party. This and many such acts
of commission and omission widened the growing gap between her and Ralph.
The lies she told Ralph, she expected to explode one day. She waited for the
explosion which never took place.

She introduced Elmer Moffatt to Ralph, who was working hard with a
company which dealt in real estate. Ralph was unable to make enough money
to meet her growing demands. Moffatt made use of Ralph’s influence in clinching a deal which brought some money with which Ralph could send Undine to Paris to recover from her nervous breakdown. Once in Paris, she was again in her elements enjoying the company of her former friends including Comte Raymond de Chelles who was struck by her beauty and charm. She was happy to have admirers around her. There was Peter Van Degen too who was willing to spend for Undine courting her. The admiration of Raymond and Undine’s acceptance of it roused the jealousy of Peter Van Degen.

Back at home in New York, the Marvells were distressed by Undine’s promiscuity. She stopped writing letters to Ralph and failed to return when Ralph was down with pneumonia on the verge of death. She filed a divorce suit against Ralph.

Undine Spragg’s Upbringing

Upbringing, an important category, decides the character of the protagonists. *The Custom of the Country* bears close resemblances to *The House of Mirth* and ‘The Other Two’, a short story. The upbringing of Undine Spragg is very similar to that of Lily Bart. The only major difference being that Lily’s parents died when she was young, thus leaving her to the custody of aunt Peniston. Right from her childhood, Undine got whatever she wanted. Abner E. Spragg, her father and Leota Spragg her mother brought her up like a princess, she being their only daughter. Her upbringing answered to the case of
a baby born in an upper middle class family of the Victorian times where the refrain was “your Majesty the baby” posited by Mark Poster. If it is a baby-girl, the mother’s aim is to get for her all that she missed in her own life or whatever she herself wanted but failed to get.

Mrs. Wharton criticism is worth quoting: “Mrs. Spragg had no ambition for herself – she seemed to have transferred her whole personality to her child – but she was passionately resolved that Undine should have what she wanted, and she sometimes fancied that Mrs. Heeny, who crossed those sacred thresholds so familiarly, might some day gain admission for Undine (11).

After trying one or two places, in the spirit of keeping up with the Joneses, Undine Spragg decided to go to New York, when the Winchers she met in Virginia spoke highly of New York. Wherever she went, she “found herself easily first” with her stunning beauty even as a young girl. However when Miss Wincher was indifferent to her beauty classing her with the Chegs girls on the hunt for young men, Undine was enraged. On hearing about New York from them, the pioneer blood in Undine became restless. Then Undine vowed herself: “I’ll never try anything again till I try New York!” (57).

Her one desire was to get into the high society of New York. She was tired of Apex the city where she grew up. She was disenchanted with other resorts she visited. Mrs. Wharton’s significant assessment of Undine’s
character runs as follows: “There was something still beyond, then – more luxurious, more exciting, more worthy of her! She once said to herself, afterward, that it was always her fate to find out just too late about the ‘something beyond’.” (54)

This trait as well as many other aspects of Undine’s character was shaped and strengthened by her parents’ yielding to every one of her wishes. Ironically, she quickly learnt to bring them round to her point of view. They pampered her willingly and joyfully in the beginning. So long as they were in Apex City they could fulfill her demands easily as they were very rich there. They could exercise some control over her to the extent of annulling her hasty marriage to Elmer Moffatt.

Once in New York Undine wanted to associate herself with the best aristocratic society, ‘the charmed circle’ which included the Dagonets, the Marvells, the Van Degens, and the Driscolls. It meant buying new expensive dresses or booking an opera box. The tenacity with which she fought with her parents to get these tings and the helpless yielding of her father/parents prove Poster’s theory of the role of upbringing of the children, which seals the fate of the family. Of the many instances, it will suffice to quote one instance of bad upbringing in the words of Mrs. Wharton:
“Father, you’ve got to take a box for me at the Opera next Friday”

From the tone of her voice Undine’s parents knew at once that she was “nervous”...

The symptoms of Undine’s nervousness were unmistakable to Mr. and Mrs. Spragg....”Well, I guess I can’t buy a box for her”...”we might as well go straight back to Apex”, she breathed at last between her teeth...

“I’d a good deal rather have a box for the season”, she rejoined, and he saw the opening he had given her. She had two ways of getting things out of him against his principles; the tender wheedling way, and the harsh-lipped and cold – and he did not know which he dreaded most. As a child they had admired her assertiveness, had made Apex ring with their boasts of it; but it had long since cowed Mrs. Spragg, and it was beginning to frighten her husband. (41-43)

In fact Undine wanted a box simply to place herself on equal footing with Clare Van Degen. But she pretended that “all she wanted was improvement; she honestly wanted the best.” (52) She also expected to impress Ralph Marvell, her target. Undine had her own designs in asking for a box. By getting her whatever she wanted, Mr. and Mrs. Spraggs pampered and spoilt her. What they never foresaw was that Undine would turn incorrigibly selfish
and defend her inhuman acts with convincing arguments in the name of social advancement.

Undine’s ultimate aim was to enter the much publicized ‘charmed circle’ of high society which appeared impregnable. “Beyond the park lay Fifth Avenue – and Fifth Avenue was where she wanted to be!” (18).

There is a very close resemblance between Undine Spragg and Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth*. Both were extraordinarily beautiful and considered it their asset. It gave them the overconfidence that they could conquer anyone with it. The parents of both these girls humoured them, pampered them and to a large extent identified themselves with the girls in realizing their dream of conquering the aristocracy. Both the girls dreamt of marrying into princely families, rubbing shoulders with Dukes and Duchesses. The only difference between the two is that Lily was a miserable failure because she refused to marry for money and Undine was a success.

In pampering her, Undine’s parents failed to instill in her thrift or moral sense or cultural values. Mrs. Spragg almost always seconded Undine in making the unwilling Mr. Spragg spend for their daughter. Undine inherited from her parents, particularly her father the curt manner of speaking whenever she was crossed with embarrassing questions or arguments.
Mr. and Mrs. Spragg deluded themselves with the idea that they had to yield to the wayward impulses of Undine in order to help her climb into the aristocratic society. They came to New York from Apex City with this sole aim in their minds. Whenever her father or mother hesitated to get her what she wanted, Undine burst out her refrain that they should get back to Apex City.

**Everyday Life of the Spraggs Family**

Everyday life of the family is as important a category as upbringing in shaping one's character. Amusement and respectability were the two things Undine wanted selfishly and greedily. As seen earlier her parents lived for Undine. When they came to New York, they chose to live in the Stentorian Hotel though they had a house of their own in the West End. Mabel Lipscomb, introduced her to different sets of people. Meeting Ralph Marvell was a turning point in her life. Until she met him and her family, she was ignorant of the different social gradations of New York Society. When she received an invitation for a dinner from Laura Fairford, she did not know that she was conferred with a great honour until Mrs. Heeny, the masseuse told her about the Marvells and that Laura Fairford was the sister of Ralph Marvell. Actually Undine had crumpled the invitation without knowing that it signified the entry into the very society she was craving for. The following quote shows how much Mrs. Spragg was overjoyed.
Undine was a constant source of expenditure and dread to her father. She thought that it was the duty of the men folk to go downtown and bring the spoils for their women. She was least interested in the world of business its intricacies, fluctuations and occasional disasters. According to Nevius Blake she is the “most egocentric and dehumanized female in American fiction. Undine Spragg is the perfect flowering of the new materialism. (148) He adds that “Undine may to a certain extent be understood, and perhaps even sympathized with, as a symbolic victim of the forces which at the turn of the century were shaping the new America. She can hardly be other than what she is, the spirit of materialism incarnate (152).

Marriage as Vocation

Marriage, as elaborated in Chapter I, is crucial to the study of the family. Soon after Undine got engaged to Ralph Marvell, Mr. Spragg had to get ready for the expensive marriage, as proposed by Undine and Mrs. Spragg. He could not say no to them as it meant an alliance with the aristocracy. The entry of Elmer Moffatt with a bang into the business circle of New York came as a blow to Undine as he was her first husband whom she had divorced at the instance of her father. To the Marvells divorce was anathema and hence it was mandatory for Undine to keep Moffatt’s mouth shut. One of the means she
chose was to advance the marriage for which Mr. Spragg was not financially prepared. But there was no choice for him.

The way she handled Moffatt’s ominous presence without considering her father’s financial position triggered a quick negative reaction from him, because she did not discuss with him the details of her problem with Moffatt. Moffatt was an imminent threat to her marriage with Ralph Marvell. Moffatt himself is not clear how he might destabilise her golden future. The following conversation with Moffatt is crucial in the life of Undine:

“What I mean is that out here in the East they don’t even like it if a girl’s been engaged before....

“What is it you want, Undine? Why can’t you say it right out?”

“What I told you. I don’t want Ralph Marvell- or any of them- to know anything. If any of his folks found out, they’d never let him marry me-never! And he wouldn’t want to: he’d be so horrified. And it would kill me; Elmer-it would just kill me!” (114)

Undine promised to help him after marriage if he agreed to keep his mouth shut about their earlier marriage. They reached an agreement on this matter. Nevertheless she was unprepared to take a risk and hence wished to advance the wedding and pestered her father to raise the necessary money. Having learnt from Mr. Dagonet that Ralph was not trained for any business to
earn money, Mr. Spragg thought it fit to break off her engagement. Undine flew into a tantrum and convinced her father of her conviction to marry Ralph. Mr. Spragg, as usual, helplessly yielded to her demand.

**Attitude to Marriage and Divorce**

Divorce is central as well as crucial to the whole family. It was a social as well as economic phenomenon which attracted people to New York from the West. According to Mrs. Wharton, the rich businessmen who came from the West invaded the aristocratic society of New York. With their money power the newcomers conquered the aristocracy resulting in inter-marriages. Undine Spragg conquered the Ralph Marvell aristocracy with her fresh and exceptional beauty. Undine keenly felt the excitement of getting engaged to Ralph Marvell. With her extraordinary sense of adaptability she modulated her language, tone, manners to the venerable aristocracy. “It’s better to watch than to ask questions.” (65) She adopted this as her guiding principle.

Undine Spragg and Ralph Marvell represented two different worlds with entirely different values. Lacking in taste, breeding and sensibility Undine was unaware of the sacredness of marriage as an institution. She knew of their attitude to divorce as disreputable. Her assertiveness and insensitiveness in her arguments about the prospective divorce of Mabel Lipscomb at the dinner with Mr. Dagonet show how ill-equipped she was in her relation with the New York aristocracy as the following passage illustrates:
Undine’s eyes opened wide. Here at last was a topic that really interested her and one that gave another amazing glimpse into the camera obscure of New York society. “Do you mean to say Mabel would be worse off, then? Couldn’t she even go round as much as she does now?”

Mrs. Marvell met this gravely. “It would depend, I should say, on the kind of people she wished to see.”

“Oh, the very best, of course! That would be her only object.”

Ralph interposed with another laugh. “You see, Undine, you’d better think twice before you divorce me!”

“Ralph!” his mother again breathed; but the girl, flushed and sparkling, flung back: “Oh, it all depends on you! Out in Apex, if a girl marries a man who don’t come up to what she expected, people consider it’s to her credit to want to change. You’d better think twice of that!” (95-96).

This conversation on divorce reveals opposing attitudes to divorce. Undine, brought up in Apex, takes a casual attitude to divorce as an acceptable sequel to disappointed partners. For the first time she has a glimpse of the New York idea of divorce as a disadvantage for a woman. This conversation predicts a few things in the most sinister fashion justifying the title of the novel. Mabel Lipscomb divorced her husband and married James Rolliver a very rich man. The divorce was unceremonious and the marriage was
sensational. It was sensational because, it also predicted Undine’s divorce. She did not think twice before it as humorously put by Ralph. There is a warning in Undine’s challenge asking him to think twice before disappointing her. To his question what she expected, her reply ‘everything’ portends his tragedy.

This conversation highlights the conflict and disaster that ensues when two societies with opposing values confront. Undine-Ralph marriage enacts the ruin of two families which is not unpredictable though the Marvells and the Fairfords foresee it to some extent. Ralph Marvell, becomes the victim and his tragic misplaced love for Undine blinds him to her faults.

**Romantic Love and Disillusionment**

Romantic love is a characteristic feature of the bourgeois and aristocratic families. Ralph’s upbringing with cultural habits and his love of arts and letters which he pursues as a dilettante made him unfit for business and money-making. He was brought up to be a “gentleman”. He had always wanted to write a lyric poem or a critical essay. His devoted mother, loving sister, kind cousin Clare Van Degen and generous grandfather Mr. Dagonet partook a common tradition. There was a common wavelength in their feelings, beliefs and thoughts. All of them were not happy with Undine Spragg as they saw clearly that there was no possibility of her ever fitting into their traditional life. Undine’s dazzling beauty blinded him to her real spirit and character. Instead he saw in her the angel of his creative writing.
With this view, he took her to Italy for their honeymoon. He expected the lonely beautiful mountains in conjunction with her presence to kindle his creative spirit. Before the honeymoon was over Ralph woke up from romantic slumber and saw Undine for what she really was – a lover of admiring crowds, fine dress, parties, gay excursions. Above all, she had no idea of economy or money. For her, money was there to buy all that she wanted. Her wants were limitless. And she believed that it was the job of her menfolk to provide her with the money whenever she needed it. She refused to be bothered with financial constraints. The news of her father’s disaster in the stock market shook her. But her practical mind suggested that they should approach Laura Fairford for a loan. She was unable to see how delicate it was for Ralph to ask for a loan.

In the hands of an iron-willed woman Undine, Ralph soon discovered that he was helpless like her father Mr. Spragg who had learnt to accept her vagaries fatalistically. His dream of saving her from ugly “Vandegeism” also failed. Undine discarded him while she went on excursions with people she liked. Just before they left for New York after honeymoon, she came to know of her pregnancy. Ralph was shocked to see her terribly upset over it as it would prevent her from showing off in parties in New York the new fashionable dresses she had bought in Paris. Many critics have commented on her hatred for pregnancy and motherhood. She lacks the instinct of
motherhood and rebels at her confinement during pregnancy, complaining that it spoils her freedom. (149) Pregnancy and childbirth are horrors to her, because she cannot enjoy her own femininity in that mode” (92).

Their romantic love and hasty marriage was based on unexamined, unfounded, unverified notions of each other. Ralph was so much bewitched by her beauty that he imagined her to possess qualities she did not really possess. Similarly Undine was swept off her feet to dizzy heights when she could enter the coveted and impregnable aristocracy of New York which really did not possess the means to satisfy her greed. Ironically, their parents saw through their illusions, but could not stop them from marrying.

In *The Custom of the Country*, Mrs. Wharton presents three types of families representing different cultural sensibilities which conflict with one another. These three types are as follows:

1. The bourgeois family of Apex with the pioneer blood in them scrambling for success. The Spraggs and Elmer Moffatt represent this group.

2. The Old New York aristocratic family struggling to retain its identity and values from the onslaughts from the West. The Marvells and the Dagonets belong to these families.
3. The French nobility with its inviolable and impregnable traditions receiving the same assault as the old New York aristocracy from the Americans. The De Chelles stand for this class.

Undine Spragg and Elmer Moffatt make inroads into the strong-hold of the other two families with a devastating effect on the crumbling aristocracy and the French nobility.

The Old New York Aristocracy

A family belonging to this aristocracy possessed certain fine qualities of mind the business class could not understand and Poster discusses this in detail in his book cited in Chapter I The Marvells, Ralph, his mother Mrs.Marvell, Mrs.Laura Fairford his sister, Mrs. Clame Van Degen Old Mr.Dagonet, Mr. Charles Bowen, the family friend shared many qualities in common. They all looked down upon money-making. They did not judge a person by their bank balance. They were cultivated people interested in music, painting and books. They shunned cheaply attractive things. Their very language was soft and measured like music. They valued family honour and reputation more than anything else, as the following words show:

Nothing in the Dagonet and Marvell tradition was opposed to this desultory dabbling with life. For four or five generations it had been the rule of both houses that a young fellow should go to Columbia, or Harvard, read Law, and then lapse into more or less
cultivated inaction. The only essential was that he should live "like a gentleman" - that is, with a tranquil disdain for mere money-getting, a passive openness to the finer sensations, one or two fixed principles as to the quality of wine, and an archaic probity that had not yet learned to distinguish between private and "business" honour. (75)

In the business of life, financial success is superior to finer things. The above short passage gives an insight into the upbringing of Ralph Marvell as well as the chink in his armour. Though he is envied for marrying a very beautiful woman, he never could foresee that his tragic failure was inherent in the upbringing, psychic structure and emotional pattern of these two families.

In the earlier section of this analysis we saw the results of the upbringing and everyday life of Undine Spragg. She grew into a self-willed and spoilt woman hell-bent on getting what she wanted. The pioneer blood in her goaded her to go one step further. She had no scruples. But she knew how to accommodate herself to every new situation very impressively. She lived for amusement by climbing the social ladder despite all odds sacrificing anything and everything that stood in her way. She did not hesitate to divorce her husband Ralph who adored her. Her life was - at least in the eyes of Ralph - a series of lies.
The emotional pattern of the Marvell family was in sharp contrast to that of the Spraggs. The Marvells and the Dagonets valued family honour above everything. The very idea of divorce was too much for them. Undine’s casual reference to the possibility of Mrs.Lipscomb divorcing her husband, that too for what appeared to the Marvells a flimsy reason, shocked them all at the dinner at Mr.Dagonet’s. Marriage and divorce are intimately related issues. To the old New York aristocracy, marriage was sacred and indissoluble as much as divorce was a scandalous anathema.

Though it was aware of the growing divorces, it assiduously excluded the divorces from its charmed circle. It knew that it was helpless before the changes overtaking them. The way the Marvells showed their concern for Ralph when his relation with Undine was getting strained is an example of their delicacy of feeling.

Their discretion was like the hushed tread about a sick-bed. They permitted themselves no criticism of Undine; he was asked no awkward questions, subjected to no ill-timed sympathy. They simply took him back, on his own terms, into the life he had left them to; and their silence had none of those subtle implications of disapproval which may be so much more wounding than speech (306).
The conflict between Undine and Ralph was a matter of conflicting sensibilities and emotional patterns. Undine’s upbringing and the resultant psychic structure did not cultivate her mind for artistic things or refine her sensibility. The root of the problem lay in their conflicting attitude to money. The Marvells attached great value to family relics namely the jewels handed down from their ancestors. Undine’s resetting of the ring and the pendant was a turning point in the life of Ralph. It was the “one moment that formed the point beyond which there was no returning”. (213) More than the value he attached to the relics, the fact that Undine lied to him about it hurt him more like a sharp stab. The following quote is one of the clues to the emotional patterns of the aristocracy:

He (Ralph) no longer minded her having lied about the jeweler; what pained him was that she had been unconscious of the wound she inflicted in destroying the identity of the jewels. He saw that, even after their explanation, she still supposed he was angry only because she had deceived him; and the discovery that she was completely unconscious of states of feeling on which so much of his inner life depended marked a new stage in their relation. (214).

The French Nobility

Poster’s categories relating to the American aristocracy can be extended to the French aristocracy too. The de Chelles of French nobility are, in many
respects, like the Marvells and the Dagonets. The womenfolk of Comte Raymond de Chelles were not keen on his marrying Undine Spragg, an American divorcee. They considered marriage a sacred bond and divorce unthinkable. This attitude of theirs was in a way stricter and more rigid than that of the New York aristocracy.

Undine’s relation with her new husband Raymond de Chelles, though flattering to her vanity in the beginning, began to gall her soon after. It was because of the customs and habits of the French noble family, which appeared irrational and restricting to her.

This restriction of her freedom was unusual to her spirit. “Her parents, from her tenderest youth, had tacitly recognized her inalienable right to ‘go round’...” (481). The contrast between the emotional patterns of the American family and French family is the source of the conflict in their relation.

**Their Everyday Life**

The French idea of domestic felicity was strongly tradition-bound. The everyday life of a French family consisted in going to a good many dull dinners or entertaining the stream of visiting relatives. Undine’s in-laws were disappointed with her continued childlessness. They expected her to bear a child of Raymond.
The French noble family included its distant minor relations to form an indivisible whole. American bourgeois nuclear family appeared strange and incomprehensible to them. "Notwithstanding their very definite theories as to what Americans were and were not, they were evidently bewildered at finding no corresponding sense of solidarity in Undine; and little Paul's rootlessness, his lack of all local and linear ties, made them (for all the charm he exercised) regard him with something of the shyness of pious Christians toward an elfin child" (513-514).

Conflict between French Nobility and American Apex City Bourgeoisie

There was a rootedness to tradition, changelessness in their family customs and habits that the French family seemed to belong more to the past than the present. Princess Estradina's remark about the Americans to Undine illustrates the gap between American and French attitudes to marriage and family as the following address by the Princess Estradina shows:

"...You Americans are really extraordinary. You appear to live on change and excitement; and then suddenly a man comes along and claps a ring on your finger, and you never look through it to see what's going on outside... It's a thousand pities you haven't had a child. They'd all treat you differently if you had" (515).
There were subtler gradations to society in France than Undine, an American, could recognize in the New York aristocracy. Similarly Raymond her French husband could not perceive the American love of rights, freedom, and individualism in Undine. He assumed that Undine would follow French customs after marrying him. Undine presumed that she could easily bring him round to her point of view as he appeared to be madly in love with her.

Soon after her marriage with Raymond de Chelles, Undine was elevated to the rank of a Marquise which brought glamour without any financial advantage. To her grief she discovered that her problem with Raymond as in the case of Ralph Marvell earlier, started with money. Instead of reducing her want, she wished to sell some of the heirlooms to make a fortune out of them. This gave rise to a bitter quarrel with Raymond. The quarrel brings out an important dimension to the character of the French nobility, namely the sacredness they attach to the heirlooms given by their ancestors. Undine wanted to sell some of the tapestries handed down from Raymond’s great-grandfather originally given by Louis the Fifteenth. Raymond sarcastically told her that she did not understand them and refused to sell the tapestries.

This verbal clash between the two highlights the sharp differences between the American from Apex and the French nobility – the differences are the differences in the emotional patterns of these two families representing two different cultural habits with differing sets of values. Raymond de
Chelles stands for family solidarity, honour and decency. We should not presume that Mrs. Wharton is partisan in her presentation of the three family models as she appears to side with the old New York aristocracy and the French nobility. Her masterly presentation of the family and social life of her times in this novel prompted Q D. Leavis to choose this as her masterpiece: "The Custom of the Country (1913) is undoubtedly her masterpiece... Here the theme is explicitly "social disintegration." (79) She gives her reason "The feature of most permanent interest in the book is the systematic portrayal of the various groups in New York society. (77)

The Custom of the Country, while narrating the adventures of Undine Spragg in three different family situations with three different emotional patterns it also highlights the nature of bourgeois romantic love, the inevitable divorce due to differences in upbringing, and finally the evil effects of divorce on the children, husbands and all the families concerned.

Ralph Marvell rightly described himself as a 'plodder and lyric idiot' and committed suicide by shooting himself, unable to tolerate the disillusionment about his wife Undine's earlier marriage with and divorce of Moffatt and her consequent lies about her past and present. In his view his life with her was a series of lies and deception. It was a greater blow to him than her divorce or her claiming legal and rightful custody of their son Paul Marvell.
Undine's divorce of Raymond de Chelles produced a similar effect on him and his family. The Marvell family as well as the members of the de Chelles family were against the marital alliance with Undine. Her beauty charm and deceptive adaptability blinded her lovers and admirers alike. "Her entrances were always triumphs; but they had no sequel" (541).

The impact of Undine's divorces was hard for her son Paul Marvell. He was separated from his French father whom he loved and sent to a public school after his mother's re-marriage with Moffatt. The following quotation explains the emotionally impoverished life of Paul:

They (Undine and Moffatt) were always coming and going: during the two years since their marriage they had been perpetually dashing over to New York and back, or rushing down to Rome or up to the Engadine: Paul never knew where they were except when a telegram announced that they were going somewhere else. He did not even know that there was any method of communication between mothers and sons less laconic than that of the electric wire; and once, when a boy at school asked him if his mother often wrote, he had answered in all sincerity: "Oh yes – I got a telegram last week" (577).
Paul suffered from isolation. He found his own room in the new palatial home in Paris desolate as he could not find his toys or books. He was a stranger in his own home amidst new servants. The books in the library though very attractive were beyond his reach. As they were expensive, they were under lock and key.

Many people came and went in his life, often so quickly and for so short a time that he did not remember them all. He did not remember his own father Ralph Marvell until Mrs. Heeny reminded him. He did not understand the many transitions in his life. Nor did he have a clue to his mother’s marriages. “So he had remained without a key to her transitions, and had to take for granted numberless things that seemed to have no parallel in the experience of the other boys he knew” (583). Paul loved his French father so much that he was upset to read from Mrs. Heeny’s clippings about his brutality in the confessions of his mother before divorce. He knew it was untrue and this thought troubled him: “She said things that weren’t true... That was what he had always feared to find out...She had got up and said before a lot of people things that were awfully false about his dear French father... (586).

Judith Fryer declares: The Custom of the Country is a novel whose subject is the divorce between the sexes in American life” (103). Paul Marvell was a forlorn boy tossed from one family situation to another. He could only vaguely sense that his dumb sufferings had their root in his mother’s divorces
and remarriages. His sad condition is an indictment of Undine's life of marriages and divorces for money, status and high society. Together with Paul Marvell of *The Custom of the Country*, whose loneliness and bewilderment provide the final commentary on his mother's career, the eleven-year-old Clarissa anticipates the Wheater children, that riotous and cosmopolitan brood whose collective martyrdom is one of the major issues of *The Children* (Blake, 212). Amidst this chaos and conflict between different sections of society, people like the elder Mrs. Marvell, Raymond de Chelles, Clare Van Degen fight their battle against the disintegration of the family. The question of saving the family from the forces of disintegration is taken up by Edith Wharton in *The Age of Innocence*. 
A Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Age of Innocence* recreates the personal and social life of aristocracy in Old New York in the last quarter of the 19th century. It was published in 1920 when Mrs. Wharton's creative power was at its peak. Cohesive family, marital discord and divorce, the central issues taken for study here, are treated with authenticity and immediacy by Mrs. Wharton who captures the change in attitude to these crucial issues in the course of thirty years. It is not a static representation of static society. Old New York of the 1870s is a closed and provincial society which refuses to offer the freedom to divorce. Its inexorable laws thaw and dissolve in the course of thirty years.

*The Age of Innocence* is the story of the triangular love of Newland Archer, May Welland, and Countess Olenska. Countess Olenska returned to New York separated from her European husband who was a scoundrel. She brought with her a whiff of fresh air, sophistication and a hint of scandal. Her arrival coincided with Newland’s engagement to May. Against their will Newland and the countess developed a passionate love, which had no place in the conservative Old New York society. Meanwhile Newland expedited his marriage with May to avert any indiscretion. However, he could not dissociate
himself from Countess Olenska. The Wellands contrived to send the Countess back to Europe with a grand farewell party to her.

Society is the arch-villain in this novel and it precipitates the conflict in the love-triangle. Newland Archer and Countess Ellen Olenska tried to rebel against the norms laid down by society which blindly insisted on ‘form’, a key word in the understanding of this novel. Archer and Ellen were expected to conform to this ‘form’.

There were many unwritten codes of conduct to be observed by young men and women at the time of marriage in the 1870s in Old New York. Marriage was solemnized after a fairly long period of engagement and betrothal. Everything including the announcement of engagement was an unhurried affair and there was a gap of more than six months, between engagement and marriage. The Old New York aristocracy, to which Newland Archer and May Welland belonged, was an inflexible and provincial society.

However, there was a constant threat to the complacency of this aristocracy from different quarters. In The Age of Innocence the threat came from Europe in the form of Countess Olenska. She brought with her a set of new values. It was evident in the colour and cut of the dress she wore, in her free, unrestrained social manners, in the choice of her residence among the
disreputable bohemians, in the way she arranged flowers in her drawing room—
in short, in everything she did.

_The Age of Innocence_ captures two family models namely the
aristocratic family and the bourgeois family as defined by Mark Poster. In fact,
the novel points to the transition from the former to the latter. The character
and actions of Newland Archer, the hero of this novel, represent the conflict
between the two. An aristocrat by upbringing, he was a bourgeois individualist
in spirit, with a keen romantic passion. As an individualist he valued individual
freedom more than anything else and at least in theory, he was willing to
concede equal freedom to women: Mr. Jackson the authority on "family"
insinuated that Countess Olenska was seen living with her husband’s secretary
who helped her to get away from Count Olenski. Newland’s rejoinder is
characteristic:

Newland reddened. “Living together? Well, why not? Who had
the right to make her life over if she hadn’t? I’m sick of the
hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her
husband prefers to live with harlots”

He stopped and turned away angrily to light his cigar. “Women
ought to be free – as free as we are”, he declared, making a
discovery of which he was too irritated to measure the terrific
consequences (39).
There was another side to the character of Newland. He was conventional to the core in viewing May Welland his lady love. He is possessive and feels proud of her as the owner of the most beautiful, tall innocent Diana-like young girl. He dreamt naively of spending his honeymoon in Italy reading and explaining classics on love to his young bride.

Though *The Age of Innocence*, is written in the conventional third-person narrative, the people and incidents of the Old New York are presented through the consciousness of the central character Newland Archer. The view of events and characters is mediated by his consciousness. Mostly the author identifies herself with him and at some other times she stands away from him, critical of the inadequacy of his perspective. This happens whenever he meets Countess Olenska, who has a better sense of the world and life having had a tragic married life. Now estranged from her husband she shocks him by making disconcerting remarks about solemn and influential people like the Van der Luydens.

**Everyday Life of the New York Aristocracy**

As stated earlier, the daily life plays a vital role in determining the character of the protagonist. *The Age of Innocence* is a study of the aristocratic families of the 1870s, which Mrs. Wharton calls the leisured class. In her autobiographical memoir *A Backward Glance* (1934) she gives an amusing but authentic picture of the several dimensions of this class, its strengths and
weaknesses. Of course, the view is that of a sensitive novelist and not a sociologist or a family theorist. Nevertheless, it cannot be dismissed as a personal and subjective point of view.

The aristocracy lived on its enormous income from property, investments and shares. To work for a livelihood was below their dignity. However, after university education, young men associated themselves with the legal profession more as a pastime than as a profession. Probity in business was sacred to them as much as fair name and reputation in personal conduct. Even rich retail shopkeepers were strictly kept out of this elite community. Writers and artists were treated as social outcasts and an inferior breed of aristocracy people. They had no taste for literature or art and were provincial in outlook. If they visited Europe they did it to show off their wealth and return with latest fashionable dresses. They mixed with Americans there and looked down upon the Europeans and their culture which they neither understood nor appreciated. Of course, there were exceptions.

Husband-wife relationships were largely stable. In case of extra-marital relations, the person who caused it was frowned upon with “that woman” spoken under breath. Divorces were rare. Wives were adored by the husbands; the hearth was her place, knitting, receiving calls and paying visits were her profession. Education was offered at home for both sons and daughters. “The facts of life” were not generally discussed and were unknown to young women
until marriage; at least they were supposed not to know about them. Fallen women were ostracized. Double standards were strictly observed and accepted as a matter of fact without question.

A family consisted of parents, children, who were assisted by nurses, governesses and cooks. There was a strong filial bond and the elders were respected and obeyed. At eighteen, a young girl was introduced to the society in a big 'coming out party' and was married off in a year or two. Economic independence and the concept of working women were unknown. Marriage was the single goal of a young woman to get settled in life. Though young men and women had the freedom to choose their partners, parents' approval was mandatory. Women could not claim ancestral property as a matter of right. Dating had not yet come into vogue; nor did teenagers leave their homes claiming independence. There was a well-laid pattern of life to be lived which was sanctified by long tradition, the breach of which was unpardonable. Surprisingly, men of this class were not money-minded and they were contented with what they had. In other words, their lives were not largely spent in pursuit of money. A breed of merchants, bankers, speculators invaded Old New York from mid-west and unsettled this placid life. The Archers, the Mingotts and the Wellands are the three major families in this novel.
The Archers:

Newland Archer’s family consisted of his widowed mother Mrs. Archer and his unmarried sister Janey. Mrs. Archer was a traditional woman who believed strongly in social hierarchy as a pyramid with the most influential family at the top guiding and directing it. In her view her cousins, Henry van der Luyden and his wife Louisiana, the most influential family should uphold the family cohesion and social order and prevent their disintegration. As a representative aristocrat, she held that Dickens did not create any gentleman in his novels. However, she loved gossip and invited Sillerton and his sister to know about the latest scandal from them. Janey her daughter had no identity of her own and reflected her mother’s views and played second fiddle to her. Both the women had a great concern for Newland Archer, especially in rescuing him from his infatuation for Mrs. Rushworth. They are worried about the entry of Countess Olenska because of her disturbing Europeanised behaviour.

The Wellands:

In the Welland family Mr. Welland a quiet hen-pecked husband with indifferent health, Mrs. Welland a conventional and unimaginative woman and May Welland, their daughter were the important members. Mr. Welland is a man who is constantly worried about his health and his wife’s business was to take care of his health and her chief aim was to get her daughter married off. Their life was characterized by a dull and oppressive routine which frightened Newland so much that he was afraid May might turn him into another Mr.
Welland, a dull and unimpressive husband. There was something deadening in the family life of the Wellands. May with her Diana-like features had a fresh complexion. Newland thought: “She was a frank, poor darling, because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she had nothing to be on her guard against....” (42). He was of the view “that this frankness and innocence was only an artificial product” (43).

There was something about the luxury of the Welland house and the density of the Welland atmosphere, so charged with minute observances and exactions that always stole into his system like a narcotic. The heavy carpets, the watchful servants, the perpetually reminding tick of disciplined clocks, the perpetually renewed stack of cards and invitations on the hall table, the whole chain of tyrannical trifles binding one hour to the next, and each member of the household to all the others, made any less systematized and affluent existence seem unreal and precarious. But now it was the Welland house, and life he was expected to lead in it, that had become unreal and the brief scene on the shore, when he had stood irresolute, half-way down the bank, was as close to him as the blood in his veins (219).
The Mingotts:

The Mingott family consisted of the old formidable widow Catherine Mingott, her son Lovell Mingott and her daughter-in-law. Old Catherine with her corpulent figure ruled the household like a matriarch. She was the liveliest character in the family and Ellen, her grand-daughter took after her in courage and in her love of life. It was Catherine who controlled the destiny of Ellen Olenska especially the financial future of Ellen Olenska by fixing her allowance—raising it or reducing it.

Excepting perhaps Old Catherine and Countess Olenska, all the other families including the Lefferts, the Beauforts and the Van der Luydens were characterized by hypocrisy in the opinion of Newland Archer as well as the author. “In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (42).

Towards the end of the novel, thirty years after Newland’s marriage, his son Dallas criticized the family life of Newland and May. His criticism summed up the negative side of their family life:

“No, I forgot. You never did ask each other anything, did you?
And you never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other, and guessed at what was going on
underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum in fact! Well, I back your
generation for knowing more about each other's private thoughts
than we ever have time to find out about our own" (359-360).

The crux of the family situations was that his children started concealing
their feelings from May as Newland did earlier.

The title, *The Age of Innocence* can be read as a euphemism for *The Age
of Hypocrisy* for this is how the author presents the lives of the people of the
Old New York of the 1870s. The question arises why this hypocrisy needed to
be elaborated. The clue can be found in their attitude to and experience of
marriage.

**Romantic Love**

Romantic love is an important feature of the nineteenth century
according to Poster. In love and marriage double standards are the accepted
norm. When Newland sowed his wild oats before marriage, society winked at
it, and he himself dismissed it as a permissible aberration of a young man. At
the same time he expected his May to be a pure virgin which she was and she
had nothing to conceal from him, which pleased him immensely.

Newland's love for her was romantic. He had dreams of going to Italy
for honeymoon, read and teach her classics. He thought that he was
exceptionally intelligent and deserved the most beautiful May for his wife. He sent every day a bunch of lilies which pleased her suitably. By training May answered to his expectations of an innocent and pure woman. She dutifully accepted every social convention relating to marriage including a long engagement.

Everything went off smoothly until the arrival of Countess Olenska into this convention-bound society. She was a thirty year old, charming, Europeanised woman estranged from her husband and seeking independence. Her free exotic manners combined with inaccessibility made her charming. A hint of scandalous stay with her husband’s secretary, though a rumour, shocked everybody. This drove Newland to press for an immediate announcement of his engagement with May to avoid embarrassment:

Newland discovered that the very same innocence made May unimaginative and her mental eyes were bandaged with conventions. He thought:

It would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman’s eyes, and bid her look forth on the world. But how many generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault? He shivered a little, remembering some of the new ideas in his scientific
books, and the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them. What if, when he had bidden May Welland to open hers, they could only look out blankly at blankness! (80-81).

This reflection of Newland about May is not a true and complete picture of her. Newland was afraid of losing his heart to Countess Olenska who had a strong attraction for him. This fear induced him to advance their wedding to an earlier date.

May Welland, in fact, was not really as innocent as she appeared. She could sense some danger in this proposal of Newland. She declared that she was not as ignorant as her mother thought her to be. When he proposed an early marriage, with a sure feminine instinct she touched upon the woman behind his declining interest in her (May) and said:

But suddenly her look changed and deepened inscrutably. “I’m not sure if I do understand,” she said. “Is it – is it because you’re not certain of continuing to care for me?”... “If that is it – is there some one else?”... “Let us talk frankly, Newland. Sometimes I have felt a difference in you; especially since our engagement has been announced” (146-147).
May told him frankly that she knew of his relation with Mrs. Rushworth and had seen the forlorn look on her face which pained her (May). With nobility May declared: "...I couldn't have my happiness made out of a wrong - an unfairness - to somebody else. And I want to believe that it would be the same with you. What sort of life could we build on such foundations?" (148).

When May spoke these words, she did not know that Newland was developing a passionate bond with her own cousin Ellen Olenska. Newland Archer fell in love with Ellen Olenska unawares. He found it truer than his love for May. He believed that Ellen opened his eyes to the real world and went to the extent of thinking of running away with her to Japan or some other far off place where social conventions were flexible. Sensing some mishap the Weiland family expedited the marriage. Even after marriage, Newland met Ellen two or three times to renew their love. Ellen, though equally passionately in love with him, discouraged him refusing to dream about running away with him as his mistress:

"Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress - since I can't be your wife?" she asked....

"I want - I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that - categories like that - won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter".
She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. "Oh, my dear – where is that country? Have you ever been there?" she asked; and as he remained sullenly dumb she went on: "I know so many who’ve tried to find it; and believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo – and it wasn’t at all different from the old world they’d left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous" (292-293).

She plainly told him that she did not want to be happy behind the backs of the people who trusted them. It is relevant to note what Edith Wharton thought about love outside marriage: "Ah! the poverty, the miserable poverty, if any love that lies outside of marriage, of any love that is not a living together, a sharing of all!" (Lubbock, Portrait, 103).

This novel, through the failure of Ellen-Newland relationship explodes the myth of romantic love outside marriage. Love between May and Newland, after marriage is a matter of duty and no more. This leads on to the question of the married life of Newland Archer.
Marriage

Even before marriage, Newland sensed misgivings about married life — "...it was borne in on him that marriage was not the safe anchorage he had been taught to think but an uncharted voyage on seas". (40). He also mused that marriage was a ...dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other “(41). Such reflections of Newland gained from watching married people struck terror in his breast.

The early married life of Newland Archer and his wife May was unpleasant for both. There was suspicion on May’s mind about Newland’s honesty and so she probed him with questions which annoyed him. On his part, he turned into a liar and felt unmanly about it. He wished to be honest; but his love for Madam Olenska prevented it. By necessity it was a secret, illegal affair.

Old New York society disapproved of such an affair. The Wellands, the Mingotts and others took the drastic action of sending Countess Olenska back to Europe. They plotted, with their clan-instinct, to stand by May in the interest of marriage and family. May gave a grand farewell party to her cousin Countess Olenska after a heart-to-heart chat. Here, the Victorian standard asserted itself — the individual had to be sacrificed in the collective interest of the community. "It was the Old New York way of taking life ‘without effusion of blood’: the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who
placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than 'scenes' except the behaviour of those who gave rise to them” (338). As these thoughts succeeded each other in his mind Archer felt like a prisoner in the centre of an armed camp.

It is the familiar question of individual versus society. Judith Fryer argues: The two problems which Wharton investigated in this novel are related: one is the moral issue of the needs of the individual versus the claims of family, tradition, and community; and the other is the nature of that community (104). Newland, at that moment, saw himself as the victim of a senseless convention. He could not foresee that the tyranny of society was not permanent nor could he visualize that he would see some good in this convention after thirty years. It should be noted that Newland, to a large extent, voices the views of Edith Wharton.

For Medora, Ellen’s aunt, “Marriage is one long sacrifice” (209). Of course she remarried several times because of her incurable romantic disposition. To May marriage meant devotion and she sacrificed everything for it.

Till her death May remained unchanged and unaware of the changes going on around her. May did not realize that “the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself” (Lawson, 24). On the other hand, marriage
changed Archer into a dutiful man and at fifty seven, he realized that he had missed the flower of life. But he did not regret it.

Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty: lapsing from that, it became a mere battle of ugly appetites. Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways (Emphasis mine) (350).

However, the life and marriage of his children, which would have been shocking thirty years before, now shocked him no more. “There was good in the new order too” (352). In some respects, Newland Archer represents the attitude of a sensible mind which accepts changes. Nevertheless, he stuck to his vision of Madame Olenska and after thirty years when his son Dallas took him to see her, he refused to meet her. He cherished the past.

He recognized the changes Old New York society had undergone. He reflected thus about the youth: “The difference is that these young people take it for granted that they’re going to get whatever they want, and that we almost always took it for granted that we shouldn’t. Only, I wonder — the thing one’s so certain of in advance: can it ever make one’s heart beat as wildly?” (Emphasis mine) (356-357).
His heart still beat wildly when he thought of Ellen. Marriage for her was a total failure as her husband was a scoundrel. She did not rejoin him although all her relatives and friends except a few advised her to do so. To her, marriage was like seeing Gorgon eye to eye. The legendary monster did not blind her eyes. Instead “she dries up one’s tears” (291). Her tragic marriage gave her the courage to look at things as they were.

Archer and Ellen are the two representative characters of the 1870s who count, in registering two different attitudes to marriage of their times. Archer was romantic, and imaginative. Thirty years after, in Paris, “He had to deal all at once with the packed regrets and stifled memories of an inarticulate lifetime” (360).

**Divorce**

The story of the novel revolves round the question of Countess Olenska’s arrival, the storm she created and her final forced but polite eviction. She came seeking divorce from her husband, as American law, unlike European law, permitted divorce. Archer persuaded her against it: “Our ideas about marriage and divorce are particularly old-fashioned. Our legislation favours divorce – our social customs don’t” (109).

Mrs. Welland’s remark on foreigners idea of divorce is also interesting: “That is just like the extraordinary things that foreigners invent about us. They
thing we dine at two o’clock and countenance divorce. That is why it seems to me so foolish to entertain them when they come to New York. They accept our hospitality, and then go home and repeat the same stupid stories” (144).

A few conclusions can be drawn from these statements. One, unlike in Europe, it was easier to get a divorce in America and that, at least, legally, it was not disapproved. Two, ideas about marriage and divorce in America were progressive, driven by the force of enlightenment ideas and individualism whereas European ideas were more traditional. Nevertheless divorce was considered unpleasant by the Mingotts and the Wellands. There was also the far-reaching consequence on the married life of May and Archer. The Old New York society with its Victorian morals was so convention-bound that it euphemistically referred to divorce as “freedom” or “independence”.

To sum up, the analysis of *The Age of Innocence* shows that Edith Wharton, as the Grand Dame of the American Novel has here not only recreated the social life and culture of Old New York with its ubiquitous brown buildings and broughams but also pointed to the changes it has undergone in the course of about thirty years. It also shows difference between the past and the present, especially the difference between the generation of Newland Archer and his son Dallas. Like a sociologist she acknowledges the changes with the conviction that change is inevitable. At the same time, unlike a sociologist or analyst of family, she makes value-judgment of these changes.
The sociologist's concern is to study the changes in detail and give a convincing account of this change. Scholars on family, marriage and divorce have largely ascribed the changes to the industrial revolution, education, economic changes, feminist movements, rise of the middle class, scientific developments among many others. They attempt a survey and note the growth in birth-rate, size of the family, increase in divorce-rate, legal, religious, and economic implications of divorce.

World War I signalled the crumbling of the whole edifice of civilization. Henry James and Edith Wharton were deeply saddened by this catastrophe. Edith Wharton found some solace in reminiscing her past, the Old New York of the 1870s. Her impatience and anger against the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie expressed most virulently in The House of Mirth and the Custom of the Country gets tempered in this novel.

However, it does not mean that she was completely reconciled to the past. She was critical of its innocence. The title of the novel is, in fact, ironic. Her criticism is directed against both May and Newland Archer. According to Archer, May's innocence is not a positive virtue: "Ah, no, he did not want May to have that kind of innocence, the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience!" Feminist critics classify Archer, with Ralph, Marvell, Ethan Frome and Martin Boyne for their inability
to take decision in crucial matters and for their incapacity in meeting the expectations of the women they love.

The final chapters of *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* suggest a positive note as observed by Pamela Knights. "But this final chapter gives more space to characters new to the text. Just as *the House of Mirth* produced Nettie Struther, who offers a solution (at least in fantasy) to many of the contradictions of the rest of the novel, so *The Age of Innocence* generates answers in figures who carry, in non-explosive versions, forms of energy blocked in the main narrative" (40).

Edith Wharton's presentation of Welland's family, or Archer's family, or Beaufort's family may not be very successful. Nevertheless, they survive, they last amidst changes and vicissitudes. Their family life might be dull or uninspiring but they have withstood the test of time. Especially, the life of Archer's children prove a success because of the sacrifices and adjustments made both by May and Archer. On the contrary, if the husband and wife start quarrelling at the slightest provocation, they spoil their lives and destroy the lives of their children as Edith Wharton depicts in *The Children*. 
SECTION 4

The Children

When The Children was published in 1928, Edith Wharton was 66 years old with no child of her own. By that time she had settled permanently in France entertaining friends. This novel belongs to the third phase of her writing. The early works written before 1905 form the first phase. The books published between 1905 and 1920 constitute the second phase. The stories Mrs. Wharton wrote between 1920 and 1930 belong to the third phase and what she wrote after 1930 is said to belong to the fourth and final phase of her writing career.

In The Children, Edith Wharton takes up the study of the consequences in the life of children due to their parents' separation and remarriages. Although the novel is set in Europe, most of the characters are Americans living in Europe. She explores here the lives of the millionaires who lead a reckless life of pleasure, gambling, yachting, visiting places according to the season unconcerned about their children. The children are left to the care of nurses and governesses.

Martin Boyne, a forty six-year-old bachelor and a civil engineer who had worked in different parts of the world, was on his way to Venice to propose to his widowed friend Mrs. Rose Sellars when he met young Judith Wheater.
Charming Judith, a kind of girl-mother and guardian to her brothers and sisters changes the course of Martin’s life. Judith and “her flock” numbering seven were tired of being bundled and transported from one hotel to another depending upon their mother Joyce’s whim. Judith and Terry implored their separated and divorced parents to get reunited and offer them a permanent home, love and care.

Martin got deeply involved in the “family” life of these young kids who ran away from their quarrelsome parents. As Martin was more and more drawn towards the charming Judith the intensity of his love for Rose Sellars declined. Martin played the role of the trial-guardian to these children and his attempts to sort out his relation with Rose and Judith ended finally in his tragic loneliness.

The aim of this section is to study the condition of American families, in the early twentieth century the question of love and marriage and finally divorce and its tragic consequences for children as presented in *The Children*. The analysis of this novel is made with the theoretical framework as the guiding factor.

In his *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*, Andrew J. Cherlin raises two crucial questions: why are the common patterns of marrying and divorcing so different from what they were just a few decades ago?; what are the consequences of these changes for the lives of adults and children and for
society as a whole? (Cherlin, 2). Also, he offers a hypothetical case of a young man who lives in more than a half-a-dozen family situations because of the divorce and remarriage of his parents. Cherlin concedes that everybody does not have a similar experience. Nevertheless the possibility is frightening. Consequently, there is the labyrinthine network of stepparents stepbrother, stepsisters, and stepgrandparents too. The picture he paints of American society is as frightening and painful as the one depicted by Mrs. Wharton in *The Children*. The findings of Cherlin are relevant for our study.

Mrs. Wharton’s assessment of the chief cause behind divorces is that “the only trouble with them is that they’re too rich” (63). The Wheaters, being millionaires, have no work to do and their life is one long holidaying, swimming, yachting, sun-bathing, gambling, dancing, and love-making.

**Love**

It is the unorthodox and adventurous ideas of love along with enormous money and time at their disposal to experiment on love, marriage and divorce which cause havoc on the lives and families of American millionaires. In *The Children* there is the extreme case of Doll Westway who committed suicide having become a drug-addict at the young age of fifteen. Doll also lived in hotels like the Wheater children following her mother’s frequent divorces and remarriages.
Judith Wheater, like Countess Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence* made many such disconcerting critical comments about her parents and others. Judith criticized the dissipated and reckless life of her parents. Though barely sixteen, she had an uncanny knowledge of her mother's love-affairs - their beginning, middle, end and the motive behind them. She was also aware of the reasons behind quarrels between her parents. Her one aim was to reunite and keep them reunited in the interests of the siblings.

There are four types of man-woman love described in *The Children*. They are:

1. The Juvenile Crush.
2. The Romantic and Idealistic Love.
3. The Altruistic Love.
4. The Playful Love of the Millionaires.

**The Juvenile Love**

Judith, at eleven, had a crush for a page in a hotel. They exchanged mementoes. They even got engaged temporarily. But it ended as quickly as it started. Blanca, her sister was eleven at the beginning of the novel. She was engaged to a lift-boy while she was at Biarritz. It was not a serious love. It was merely a childish imitation of their parents or peers. In fact, the novel makes only a passing reference to these episodes.
The Romantic and Idealistic Love

Martin Boyne is the central character in this novel. At the beginning of the novel, he was in love with Rose Sellars, a widow. She had lost her husband less than a year ago. Her friendship, her cleverness and originality, her soft beauty, her practical reason and above all her unattainability made her very attractive to Martin, until he saw Judith Wheater. Young and charming Judith was a vehicle of different passions. She was a vision to Martin. He fell in love with her although he persuaded himself that it was an elder-brotherly love and that she was no more than a child. David Holbrook asserts that Martin Boyne's love for Judith (young enough to be his daughter) was incestuous. (181) It was obvious to Rose Sellers from the beginning that Martin admired Judith. Strictly speaking, there was no conflict in Martins' mind on the question of love.

Martin was in love with his idea of Rose Sellars. Her real character was so different that he was disappointed with her. Her charm to him lay in the remoteness. He had promised to meet her. But that was before he saw Judith. After meeting Judith Wheater his feelings were divided. The following description of his consciousness is telling:

"... he had schooled himself to think that what he most wanted was to see Rose Sellars again. Deep within him he knew it was not so; at least, not certainly so. Life had since given him hints of other things he might want equally, want even more; his
reluctance to leave Venice and his newly acquired friends showed that his inclinations were divided. But he belonged to a generation which could not bear to admit that naught may abide but mutability. He wanted the moral support of believing that the woman who had once seemed to fill his needs could do so still. She belonged to a world so much nearer to his than the Wheaters and their flock that he could not imagine how he could waver between the two. Rose Sellars’s world had always been the pole-star of his whirling skies, the fixed point on which his need for performance could build” (81-82).

Martin wavered between Rose Sellars and Judith Wheater. He was inclined more towards Judith, which roused Rose’s jealousy and possessiveness. The nearness and attainability of Rose now made her look unattractive. When Martin suggested to Judith that he was willing to marry her to keep all the children, she laughed and said “Well, that would be funny” (314). She was under the impression that he wanted to marry Rose Sellars.

**Altruistic Love**

For her part, Rose Sellars who had been a friend of Martin for a long time, resisted his approaches. Though her marriage was an unhappy one, she treated him as no more than a good friend. After the death of her husband, she was free to marry and slowly responded to Martin. She was original, clever,
reasonable, tender and intelligent. She waited for the approval of her rich Aunt Julia before her marriage with Martin. Also, she wanted a gap of one year between the death of her husband and remarriage in order not to hurt the sentiments of her in-laws.

When she found Martin waver in his love after he presented her with an engagement ring she grew more submissive and declared, "Dear, I'm utterly in your hands, you see" (231). Though she wanted to force him to take a quick decision, she thought it best to wait for some time before they decide on their marriage. Like May Welland in The Age of Innocence Rose had the feminine intelligence to detect Martin's unconscious and unacknowledged love for Judith and like May had the honesty and selflessness to renounce her love for him and remain a tender and helpful friend.

The Playful Love of the Millionaires

Joyce Wheater, Cliffe Wheater, Mrs. Lullmer, Zinnia Lacrosse, Prince Buondelmonte are millionaires and life for them was a long holiday. They went to Venice or Lido or Paris in groups to enjoy themselves. They were so much caught up in the Lido season or some other season that they had no time to spare to think about their children so long as somebody like Judith or Martin was there to take care of them. Their love was never serious and they married as quickly as they divorced and took in their stride all the legal battles that accompany a divorce.
Joyce divorced her husband Cliffe, married and lived with Prince Buondelmonte. She took her children with her as the legal custodian. Once she got fed up with the Prince, she sought a divorce, and got separated. After some time she joined her husband Cliffe and a boy Chipstone was born to them. After two years, she thought of marrying Gerald, her son’s tutor. Her only saving grace was that she took the children of the Prince as her stepchildren. There was no commitment in her love and her husband Cliffe was no better. He flirted with Mrs. Lullmer when his wife flirted with Gerald.

Attitudes to Marriage

For Martin, marriage was too serious a commitment to be undertaken safely. After meeting Judith he was unwilling to marry Rose Sellars. She appeared to him like a predatory animal waiting patiently to snap him up. He had enough sense to feel that it was hideous to think of her so. Love and marriage was like a precious and fragile work of art to him. It would easily break to pieces: “Again they faced each other, guardedly, apprehensively, as if something fragile and precious, which they had been carrying together, had slipped between their fingers and been broken. He felt that, if he glanced at the floor, he might see the glittering fragments …” (220).

When Martin went back to Rose after Judith’s rejection, Rose was willing to take him back and marry him. She was also willing to adopt the twins Blanca and Terry. She was clear-headed about what she wanted in a
marriage. She did not want to be a governess to the whole flock. On her part, she had rejected the proposal of Mr. Dobree, an old gentleman and lawyer in favour of Martin. For Martin love was too difficult an emotion to understand or manage. He felt emptiness between him and Rose. He did not know what he wanted. So he went back to his work.

Martin felt that he always blundered with women. He was unable to say the right thing at the right moment. In fact, most of the 'so called heroes' in the novels of Edith Wharton are blunderers. They fail at the crucial moment and do not measure up to the expectations of their women.

Marriage was an expensive hobby for Cliffe Wheater, Joyce and their group. They change partners as they change their hobby. Their interest in their children is as casual as their attitude to love and marriage. Martin’s assessment of their view of marriage is the same as Edith Wharton’s here: “...the real wilderness is the world we live in; packing up our tents every few weeks for another move ... And the marriages just like tents – folded up and thrown away when you’ve done with them” (23).

With their sedate ideas, Martin and Rose end up in the acceptance of loneliness and emptiness between the two. While Martin Boyne and Rose Sellars are at one end of the scale in their conventional, old fashioned, idealistic notions about love and marriage, Joyce, Cliff and Mrs. Lullmer are at the other
end of the scale with their acceptance of quick marriages, quick divorces and playful love. It is interesting to note Joyce Wheater speaking glibly about the sanctity of marriage:

Oh, well; Cliffe... yes.... It was awfully dear and sweet of Martin to say that he was glad she and Cliffe had come together again, and she was glad too... and there was no denying that Cliffe had got into dreadfully bad hands when she left him.... Utterly demoralized and cowed by that beastly Lacrosse woman.... And the money pouring out like water .... Yes, she, Joyce, had seen it was her duty to take him back; and so she had. Because she still believed in the sanctity of marriage, in spite of everything. She hoped Martin did too? For if you didn’t, what was there left to hold society together? But all the same, if one came to feel that by living with a man, even if he was one’s husband, one was denying one’s Ideal: that was awful too, wasn’t it? Didn’t Martin think it was awful? (53-54).

This glib, comically serious, hypocritical pose of self-righteous Joyce shows her attitude to marriage and family. This is the Joyce who later divorced her husband Cliffe Wheater again for an older man Dobree who transformed her into a different woman, made her realize her horrible past. Mr. Dobree took
all these efforts to see that the children did not suffer because of the mistakes of their parents.

Judith Wheater was perhaps the only character in the novel who had a piercing insight into the character and motives of Joyce or her father Cliffe Wheater. Though a teenager, she knew too much about the world and people. With her sincere love and affection for the siblings she exhibits an aversion for sentimentality or the casualness of her parents and others. She says many disconcerting remarks like Countess Olanska in *The Age of Innocence*. She shocked Martin with her knowledge of her mother’s affairs. When Martin tried to dismiss her comments as the silly talk of a young girl, she retorted: “She was on her feet in a flash, quivering with anger. ‘My Age? My age? What do you know about my age? I’m as old as your grandmother. I’m as old as the hills. I suppose you think I oughtn’t to say things like that about mother – but what am I to do, when they’re true, and there’s no one but you that I can say them to?’” (61).

**Family**

Judith Wheater’s struggle to keep the children together ‘steps and all’ is a criticism of the easy American idea of divorce; she is the symbol of the defence of family against disruptive forces. She implored her parents to talk it over and get reunited. To a large extent she succeeded in it. Martin, and Mr. Dobree the lawyer who supported her cause were her trusted allies. The
governess and the nurses were on her side. She played the role of both the parents and was the head of the family. She mothered all people including her mother Joyce and Zinnia Lacrosse the actress. She could be severe and tender. She had an authoritative way when she dealt with people who disagreed with her without understanding her.

The Wheater children are not a family by any standard or definition. Joyce and Cliffe Wheater had no common residence with their children even when all of them lived in the same city. The children lived in one hotel and the parents lived in another. The parents’ idea of a family hardly went beyond good intentions. Doll Westway who committed suicide was the close friend of Judith. The girl children flirted with lift boys. To these children the parents were another set of visiting relatives who bought presents. Joyce and Cliffe claimed that they loved their children and were interested in their education and welfare. But they were so much deeply immersed in the society-life of different seasons at different places that they had no time to spare for their children.

In comparison with The Age of Innocence or The Custom of the Country, there is no family worth the name presented in The Children. The aim of the novel is to expose the disintegration of the family as an institution. Mrs. Mervin, the Wheater children’s grandmother, on whom they had pinned their hope, refuses to accept the stepchildren for the obvious reason that she was financially supported by Cliffe Wheater. Mrs. Mervin would yield if Cliffe
shouted at her. The Wheater family and its disintegration is not the lone example in this novel. There are many such. Of course, finally, Joyce married Mr. Dobree and settled with her children. Similarly the ‘steps’ went back to their respective parents. The novelist gives a tolerably happy ending. But that does not alter the fact of the sufferings the children experience.

**Divorce and its Consequences**

Divorce is one of the chief reasons behind family dissolution. In the 1870s divorce was less common than it was in 1925 and after. Joyce divorced her husband twice and Mr. Dobree was her third husband. Similarly Mrs. Lullmer a notorious woman, was Cliffe’s third wife. This apart, there were extra-marital relations about which the children were not unaware. It is a pertinent question to ask why they divorced so often. Judith said about her parents: “... Father and mother can’t make up their minds where to go next, and it’s always when they’ve got nothing particular to do that they quarrel... And if they get wrangling again what in the world is to become of us children?” (62).

When the parents relinquish their responsibilities the children like Judith are forced to take up the responsibility. In looking after the siblings, she has missed her own childhood. With the result she looked old at sixteen. “Her childhood, ...has been robbed of illusions by a forced participation in the emotional difficulties of her elders” (213).
Affluence is one of the reasons behind quick divorces. Growing industrialism, changing ideas about divorce (divorce was no more a stigma in the 1920s) changing laws about divorce contributed to quick divorces.

As the children had more than one father or mother, the children did not know how to differentiate between them. Mrs. Wharton writes: ".....indeed one surprising little girl with black curls and large pearl earrings, whom they had met the year before at Biarritz, had the habit of handing to each new playmate a typed table of her parents' various marriages and her own successive adoptions (41)."

When divorce is in question, the future of the children is often treated from the financial and legal point of view. Such children start referring to their parents by name for the sake of convenience. Children sometimes are treated as pet animals by their stepparents. When Prince Buondelmonte re-married, his new wife took a fancy for her stepchildren and came to claim them. Here is Judith's retort:

"What? Because you've just married Prince Buondelmonte, and probably think he ought to have remembered to look after Bun and Beechy? Well, I think so too. Only he didn't, you see; not when they were little, and had to be wiped and changed and fed, and walked up and down when they were cutting their teeth. And
now that they’re big enough to cut up their own food and be good company, I suppose you and he think it would be fun to come and carry them off, the way you’d pick out a pair of Pekes at a dog-show... only you forget that in the meantime they’ve grown to love us and not you, and that they’re devoted to all the other children and that it would half kill them to be separated from each other…”(286).

Judith Wheater is the champion of the family as an institution which included the stepchildren too for her.

At the end of the novel, Martin Boyne returned to Europe after a three year term as an engineer in South America. He met Zinnia playing with the lift boy going with him up and down. His own life was as much filled with loneliness as the children’s life continued to be unsettled. He saw Judith Wheater dancing with a young man. Like most of Mrs. Wharton’s novels, The Children also ends on a tragic note.

Most of the critics argue that this novel exposes the plight of the children after their parents’ separation. Judith Fryer says that the novel portrays the destruction of children by irresponsible parents (104). Dale M. Bauer takes a similar position: The subtext of this novel is neither heredity nor mass culture but how parental irresponsibility distorts children’s lives.
Judith announces that children know better how to care for each other and cites Doll Westway as her best friend and model" (108).

Edith Wharton’s concern for the family is expressed tellingly in this novel, Bauer notes:

"Until 1920, Wharton’s greatest concern is the family as the ‘fetish’ of modern life, a fetish that has its roots in the contemporaneous discussions of race and race suicide, since Wharton’s world was just beginning to see race as a biologically specific category and not, as Wharton had more loosely used the term, as a line of descent (15).

Irving Howe declares that “to a purposely exaggerated degree, the children are supposed to symbolize the currently lax notions of marriage and the responsibility imposed by a family (213).

The Children is a sad novel that marks the changes in attitudes to marriage, divorce and remarriage. It also denotes the transition from bourgeois society to neo-bourgeois society. The transition becomes pronounced in the novels of Anne Tyler who writes about the neo-bourgeois society with an altered set of values, which will be discussed in the next chapter.