CHAPTER II

FEMINISM: SEARCH FOR MARRIAGE
Beginning with her first collection of short stories, *The Greater Inclination*, and the unfinished novel, *Buccaneers*, Mrs. Edith Wharton's fiction echoes the pain of being a woman in a patriarchal social set-up. Her protagonists are pitted against a hostile society whose traditional norms of propriety are so crippling that they either perish in their struggle against it or suffer a sort of living death in adapting themselves to it. The first type is provided by Lily Bart, Ellen Olenska, Charity Royall, and to some extent by Mattie Silver, who beat their wings in vain against the society's traditionally accepted norms. The other type is provided by May Welland, Justine Brent, Zeena Frome and Ann Eliza Bunner, who make a futile attempt to adapt themselves to it, against their will and inherent nature. Edith painfully declares that woman's life in an organized society ends up in misery if any of these two paths is chosen.

As Edmund Wilson has observed, her "heroines and heroes are victims of the group pressure of convention." But Wilson conveniently refrains from making a comparative analysis of the effect of such victimization on her heroines and heroes. All the chief characters of Edith are trapped by their immediate surroundings; but the effect of such entrapment is much greater on females than on males. The American society, essentially patriarchal in nature provides less opportunities for its women than for their male counterparts, in achieving emotional
fulfilment and in asserting a mature personal identity. It is this sexual discrimination inherent in the male-oriented American society that Edith decries most earnestly through her novels.

**THE SOCIAL MILIEU.**

The society in which Wharton was reared and about which she wrote was the feudal remainder of the traditional New York aristocracy. A few families in this class traced their root to the English or Dutch aristocracy. They inherited wealth due to the rapid rise in the value of the inherited real estate or by the wholesale trade and shipping conducted in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries.

However, the last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed new fortunes accumulating in hands other than the traditional aristocracy. This transfer of social power from the mercantile aristocracy to the modern industrial plutocracy occurred gradually during the last third of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century. Mrs. Wharton contented that the 1880s formed the crux of the cleavage between these two social orders. In her best novels she dramatises the effect of such social change which was less perceptible to the common eye. As she remembers in her autobiography,
A Backward Glance, the end of the nineteenth century witnessed a hoard of suddenly enriched westerns invading the 'aboriginal culture' and finally running over it. This new element in the aristocratic society had little manners cognate with their wealth. As a result, they, at first, tried to imitate the behaviour and appearance of the aborigines. Later, having failed to imitate what they could not understand they turned their back to the social norms that the traditional aristocracy was so proud of. In this social background Wharton found her novelistic material. She was well aware of the marked distinctions in behaviour and class values and the personal confusions resulting from the movement from one social milieu to other.

SOCIAL HARDICAMENT OF WOMEN.

In any society where great wealth is concentrated in a few hands, there always arises the danger of the emergence of an idle and parasitic class. The New York society of the latter half of the nineteenth century produced such a class. The social role of this leisure class American woman was limited to an ostensible display of her husband's wealth. She was looked upon as an ornamental piece rather than a human being with flesh and blood and she was forced to accept the society's definition of her 'as a beautiful object,' the possession of which was quite worthy of a rich young man. This ideology which was evolved to meet the social and economic
needs of the rising middle class, prescribed a set characteristics for women such as submissiveness, moral superiority, chastity, self-sacrifice, devotion and delicacy. This bourgeois economic value reinforced a painful economic reality for woman in which she was totally dependent on marriage for economic and social survival. Since women's only vocation in life was to make financially respectable marriage they had to remain ostensibly virtuous. 'Beauty and virtue were the only commodities with which a girl could attract a rich husband', and they were to be 'sold to the highest bidder'.

'Virginity relinquished before marriage' inevitably meant that she was less marketable. An upper class American woman was thus perceived as an embodiment of abstractions rather than as an individual personality (in Wharton's words, "a type rather than a person.").

Her innocence consists of a systematic negation of certain aspects of her humanness and she is carefully denied knowledge and experience which might in any way be connected with sexuality. As Wharton tells us in her autobiography, in her teen-age she did not understand the meaning of adultery and thought it was something connected with travelling when she saw the board that adults have to pay more fare than children. Thus, during the developmental years, an American woman was carefully deprived of a large and significant area of human life. The mothers, grandmothers and aunts are mostly to blame for this unhappy state of affairs. The teen-aged girl was forced to live in the constant company of her mother and all her actions and even thought processes were put under the ever-watchful eyes of her mother.
Thus she was made to grow up with an artificially restricted view of the world. This socially-imposed ignorance, which Wharton ironically calls the 'innocence', is accompanied by a more appalling ignorance about the cultural tradition to which she belongs by birth.

Mrs. Wharton states that such a constriction of character is cultural rather than natural. Throughout her fiction she emphasizes that there is something intrinsically unreal about this social notion of female innocence. It is towards this artificial and unnatural innocence that Wharton directs her most scathing attack in *The Age of Innocence*.

As the title indicates, *The Age of Innocence* analyses the concept of innocence which the group pressure of society and the cultural forces have decreed for an unmarried young woman. The age of innocence, which Wharton refers to, is the America of her early childhood, the 1880s. The novel is, as Elizabeth Ammons rightly observes, "a sort of laboratory study of the fundamental, primitive attitudes that mould patriarchal aversion to the mature female."  

The plot of *The Age of Innocence* is far too simple. Ellen Olenska, the heroine of the novel, was born as Ellen Mingott in New York. Her parents lived a vagabond life. After their death she was put under the care of her aunt who was also a roamer. Ellen marries the French Count, Olenski
who is super-abundantly wealthy, but he is also a
blackguard. On discovering this Ellen deserts his luxurious
and corrupt menage and returns to New York city at the age of
thirty. When the novel opens we see Ellen in New York,
who tries hard to set up a living there. But unfortunately in
New York she finds herself more an outsider than a New Yorker.
In the eyes of the New Yorkers she is now a married woman living
separately from her husband. The New Yorkers can not digest
the idea of her appearing in an opera box in a daring French
dress. A sort of careful ostracism is followed. But soon
matters become worse. The New York society is shocked when it
learns that Ellen is trying to get a divorce from her brutal
and despotic husband.

Now things take a serious turn. Newland Archer, who
is engaged to a cousin of Ellen, May Welland, volunteers
himself to dissuade Ellen from the divorce. But his attempts
are thwarted. By profession Newland is a lawyer and his
attempt in dissuading Ellen from going for a divorce is prompted
by his sense of family disgrace which such an act brings.
Now he is also getting related to Ellen's family by marrying
May. This makes things all the more painful for him. But
when Archer meets Ellen he is captivated by her and his chivalric
spirit rises. He sees Ellen as a victim of a cruel husband
and an equally cruel legal system which treats a wife as the
property of her husband with no human rights of her own. He
decides to help her and this desire almost at once blossoms
into genuine love. Archer adopts Ellen's view that individual
is more important than tribe and that personal freedom cannot be subjugated for the sake of social life. She, on the other hand, adopts Archer's view that for the sake of one's happiness one should not inflict unhappiness on another.

Ellen Olenska applies this credo when she confronts May Welland. When Archer's choice vacillates between May and Ellen, she prefers to inflict unhappiness upon herself in order to avoid inflicting unhappiness on May. In the end, when Archer marries May, Ellen is forced (by the American hypocritical society, if not by Archer) to return to Europe; the vast Atlantic ocean separating them for ever.

May Welland and her cultural sister Bessy Westmore (The Fruit of the Tree) represent the typical innocent girl expected by the society. May has been trained to the role of wife and mother and she has no wish to escape from this limited role or even to modify it. She is "the terrifying product of the social system ... the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything" and she has been 'carefully trained not to possess' "the experience, the versatility and the freedom of judgement." Wharton further exemplifies this so-called innocence of the American women in Old New York:

Lizzie Hazeldean has long since come to regard most women of her age as children in the art of life. ... Charming creatures who passed from the nursery to marriage as if lifted from on rose-lined cradle into another.
Wyen after her marriage May is still in the nursery school of life, chanting the "nursery parody of life".9 Others take care of her well-being and do her thinking for her. They live 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."

The most unfortunate thing is that this child-woman embodies the ideal helpless femininity of her class.

A comparative study of May Welland and Ellen Olenska brings out the emptiness underlying American concept of women in the latter third of the nineteenth century. Ellen Olenska, as Elizabeth Ammons conceives her, is in many ways a "New woman available to America as early as 1870."11 Ellen is basically an artist. She is highly imaginative and highly passionate. But unlike other artists, her creative medium is her own life. Since she experiments with her own life she discovers new modes of life and new vistas of experience outside the society's narrow definition. This daring nature of her character ensures her clash with the society.

This is exactly what happens in The Age of Innocence. The conventional woman is distinguished from the "New Woman" by a number of things that she should not do. Society does not approve even the mildest lapse from what is already existing. Unfortunately, Ellen Olenska, with her European connections, brings a conception of the kind of atmosphere which makes life stimulating and gives meaning to it.
Suffering the unhappy consequences of an ill-suited marriage for ten years, Ellen decides to live independently. She settles in a small house in New York where "small dressakers, bird stuffers, and 'people who wrote' were her nearest neighbours." The first meeting of Archer and Ellen shows he fundamental differences between their attitudes towards life. By having Ellen herself out when Archer arrives, Henrik contrives a scene in which the young man responds to her setting while he waits for Ellen. The curious thing about Archer's view of her room is that he cannot see much. He is haunted by the artistry of Ellen's drawing room which is intimate, "foreign" and suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments. This atmosphere is totally different from the one he has been accustomed. He immediately ponders on his own highly American insistence and his own house in East thirty-nineth street where he and May will live after marriage. He fails to come to terms with the unforeseen style of Ellen Olenska.

She tells Archer, who is astonished at the very atmosphere of the room, that she very much enjoys living alone in that strange little house. It is this strong feeling to lead a liberated life and to achieve a mature personal identity that alienates Ellen from the rest. Here lies her individuality elided against May. She exclaims to Archer:

I have never been in a city where there seems to be such a feeling against living in 'des quartiers excentriques'. What does it matter where one lives; I'm told this street is respectable.
When Archer replies that it is not fashionable she reverberates
"Fashionable! ... Why not make one's own fashions?"  

But the American notion of woman does not permit them
to make one's own fashions and to shape one's own life.
They have to play the continuous role of child-woman. Any step taken towards self-integration and emotional fulfillment is considered to be an evil in woman. Newland Archer's preference for May Welland to Ellen Olenska on a symbolic level shows America's preference of the child-woman. In such a social milieu Wharton concludes, it is painful and degrading to be a woman.

Archer's meeting with Ellen induces some sense of mystery in his mind. Till they met Archer had been leading a sort of dormant life in his own dreamland. He was "the roundest possible peg in the roundest possible hole," as Louis Auchincloss observes.  

It was Ellen who directed Archer to the world of reality. Louis Auchincloss is right when he declares that "Ellen Olenska turns Newland Archer from a stuffed shirt into a man."  

She is like "a breath of fresh air in the oppressive society of New York."  

But Archer is totally helpless and fears to break the social milieu in taking a daring step to marry the would-be-divorcee, Ellen. Hence he marries May, the perfect child-woman. After three months of his marriage Archer abandons his new-born theory that women should be as free as men. As Wharton depicts him, he goes back to
all his inherited ideas about marriage. It was less trouble to conform with the tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives than to try to put into practice the theories with which his untrammeled bachelorhood had dallied. There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free; and he had long since discovered that May's only use of the liberty she supposed herself to possess would be to lay it on the "altar of her wifely adoration."

Thus the requirements of the ingenue role continue throughout their lives. The taboos which restrict the child-woman and the innocence she has to maintain are expected to be broken at the time of her marriage. With the help of her "husband's enlightening companionship" the bride is supposed to think and feel in hitherto forbidden ways. She can now feel fresh fields and enjoy pastures new. But the trouble with such entirely different 'before' and 'after' is that it demands impossible transition. As Archer broods:

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 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?"

Wharton here argues that the negative effects of the ingenue's education can not be undone. It is the
psychological and spiritual equivalent of a bandage over the eyes. The innocence of the ingenue is not a positive trait but "an innocence that seals the mind against imagination and heart against experience." 22

Moreover, as Judith P. Saunders points out, the ingenue's so called innocence is artificial rather than real. 23 In Wharton's own words it is a "fictitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long dead ancestresses." 24 This discrepancy between the real woman and her socially expected role is indicated by a sequence of events in the novel. Archer's sister Janey, for example, remains a spinster although her life under the presumed innocence. But in reality she is not as ignorant as she must pretend to be. Her mother carefully refrains from mentioning 'forbidden' subjects in the presence of her middle-aged daughter. But deep within herself, while alone, she feels that Janey is a grown up girl, and drops the veil of pretense: "She and Janey knew every fold of the Beaufort mystery, but in public Mrs. Archer continued to assume that the subject was not one for the unmarried." 25

Since this is the concept of ideal ingenue, complete self-realization as adult human beings turns out to be a will-o'-the-wisp for women. The child-woman is created by women for men (a conspiracy of mothers, aunts and grandmothers) and she is manufactured in all her artificiality and ignorance of life. In order to meet the demands of a conventional
marriage, women are forced to submerge their individual identities
and continue to live as 'a sleeping beauty.'

**DOUBLE STANDARDS OF SEXUAL MORALITY.**

It is obvious that Wharton's novels depict the complexities of human relationship and that both men and women suffer thwarted emotional life. But Wharton most emphatically denounces the double standards of sexual morality inherent in the American social set-up. The happiness of the American heroines is more readily sacrificed than that of their male counterparts for the very same offence. As Richard H. Lawson rightly observes:

Newland—he is more or less expected to sow his wild oats before getting married; other men in his "society by no means stop doing so at that point. The key is that it is permissible on the part of men if only it does not too violently rock the boat of the same society. Ellen has sown no wild oats whatever, but her love violently rocks the boat of the society. Therefore she is thrown overboard. The custom helps preserve the male domination of the female, the only activity at which the male characters of The Age of Innocence show any vigor, as Louis Auchincloss drily notes. One must credit Wharton with a subtle and skillful integration of the double-standard theme with the inner theme of bittersweet criticism of a vanished society." 26

Thus Ellen and Archer are equally responsible partners in the guilt of loving each other. Everybody, including May Welland, knows that Archer is violently in love with Ellen. But as a married man (the society so dictates) his primary duty is towards his wife, not to the real partner of his emotional life. The Society immediately becomes aware of the genuineness and seriousness of their affection.
But it is serious only about its own limited notion of marital obligation and it is not serious about Archer's affection for Ellen. Though late, Newland realizes that the people around him have sided with his wife in order to separate him from his partner in guilt. Society has forgiven him for his sin. But Ellen, since she belongs to her sex, is more vulnerable to the judgement of society. Ellen has to be removed from the scene because she is the intruder and Archer has to be rehabilitated.

In order to bid farewell to her departing cousin, May Welland arranges a grand party. Ironically it becomes an equally impressive social ceremony. Her cousin is departing - going back for ever to Europe. Even Newland Archer is obliged to witness this cruel rite. It is one of the most moving episodes Wharton ever depicted. Again to quote Lawson:

"each and every member of the society plays his ritual role in destroying the weak member of the pair who have outraged their custom."27 Newland Archer is in a way exonerated from his crime while Ellen suffers the most savage humiliation.

It is true that as a result of this separation both Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska suffer from emotional trauma. But Archer's suffering is limited to his emotional life. Even at the end of the novel Archer's integrity is not shaken. He may have felt that he has "missed the flower of life",28 but he has not lost his sense of self. His ego survives and his place in the society is not shaken.
But not only does it disturb Ellen's emotional life, but it
forces her to lead a life of uncertain future. Her sense
of security and self is shattered. She has to depend on
family-friends and well-wishers for support. Moreover she never
enjoys financial, social and professional freedom that Newland
Archer had. All this happens because she belongs to the
vulnerable sex.

This double standard of sexual morality is more clearly
evident in The House of Mirth. Critics are unanimous that
The House of Mirth is a novel of social waste. Blake Nevius,
for instance writes:

"Until Wharton was one of the first American
novelists to develop the possibilities of a
theme which since the turn of the century
has permeated our fiction: the waste of human
and spiritual resources which in America
used to be in hand with the exploitation
of the land and forests."

After writing Wharton's "a frivolous society can acquire
dramatic significance only through what its frivolity
destroys", he suggests that a change of the word 'frivolity'
to 'materialistic' will give the larger significance of the
novel. James W. Tittleton summarises the meaning of
"The House of Mirth" in the "ruin of exquisite creatures like
Lily bare by a society which has failed to provide her, thanks
to the surrender of its traditions, with that supporting
web of custom, manners, culture' human nature elaborately
spins around itself in traditional societies." Calvin Winter
finds that Wharton's stories from first to last "deal with the
victims of fate—men and women who are caught in the meshes of circumstance and struggle with as hopeless impotence as so many fish in a dragnet.\textsuperscript{31} Irving Howe concludes his essay suggesting that the effect of \textit{The House of Mirth} is "that of being held in a steady inexorable enclosure. Mrs. Wharton's sense of the inevitability of waste—the waste of spirit, the waste of energy, the waste of beauty—comes to seem a root condition of human life."\textsuperscript{32}

Critics thus concentrate on the 'human' and 'universal' element of waste. They do not fully conceive the precise nature of what is being wasted. Judith Fetterly is right when she observes that "her (Wharton's) symbol of social waste is specifically a beautiful woman.\textsuperscript{33} It is true that Wharton's attack is on the erotic values of the upper class New York society which fails to provide a link between culture and spirit and to give meaning to the lives of its members. Yet, to quote Fetterly again:

\textit{Lily's experience is not simply the result of her being a member of a particular socio-economic class at a particular point in time; it is equally the result of her being a member of a sexual class. The tragedy of an upper-class woman faced with "the temptation to be a beautiful object" which such a society presents to its women are destroyed by the consequence of that temptation.\textsuperscript{34}}

Wharton emphatically denounces the patriarchal culture mainly because it is so devastating upon the emotional self-fulfilment of woman. A closer analysis of \textit{The House of Mirth}
makes it obvious. The theme of human waste is ever present in her novel but the weaker sex is its most helpless victim.

Lily Bart, the heroine of the novel is introduced to us at the age of twenty-nine. She is born to wealth and to a heritage in New York society and does not experience want. This is the unfortunate thing about her upbringing. Having profligate parents, who later became bankrupt, Lily acquires excellent manners and perfect social grace: her only asset in the world. The financial ruin of her father when she is nineteen is the first setback in her life. She is left with only one way of living. She can be a worthy companion of some rich women. This will provide her an opportunity to move among the traditionally rich and aristocratic families and will enable her to make a suitable marriage for money.

Marriage is the only vocation open for a young girl in Lily's society and when the novel opens we see Lily in search of a rich husband. She is ambivalent in her choice and has already drifted away several lucrative proposals soon after her 'coming out'. Though a blue-bird by birth she has no inheritance to fall back on. The necessity to get attached to a rich husband becomes all the more urgent when her mother dies, leaving her under the guardianship of her old-fashioned aunt, Mrs. Peniston. Lily is well aware that in such a materialistic society she can survive only by making a profitable use of her beauty and charm. After the death of her mother Lily
soon becomes, thanks to her social grace, the prominent figure in the smartest and wealthiest set of the New York society. She receives money from her rich friends by occasionally acting as their social aid and mistress of the ceremonies. But soon she is fed-up with the empty sophistications of this hollow society. Searching for pleasure and a rich husband she seeks another group, the rich and powerful leaders of the society. She tries to keep company with this wealthy set by moving from house party to house party to acquire gambling debts in the process. In a moment of miscalculation, and without apprehending the dangerous consequences, she allows Gus Trenor to invest money for her which brings handsome dividends. She later discovers that Trenor expects sexual gratitude for the money he spent for her. When her aunt, Julia Peniston, learns of Lily's debts and her dubious social relations, she disowns and disinherits her. Later Bertha Dorset to save her own reputation, publicly implies that Lily is an adulteress. She, thus, becomes a liability rather than a social asset to any hostess.

From now onwards Lily's destruction is gradual. Discarded by her aristocratic friends she seeks support from another group of people, the 'nouveau riche'. For a moment she even speculates her prospect of marriage with the vulgar Simon Rosedale. She then accepts job as a seamstress in a millinery workshop but lacks adequate practical skill. Finally, she finds refuge in the slum kitchen of Nettie Struther, a prostitute-
turned housewife whom she helped once in her distress and
ended her life with an overdose of sleeping pills.

After thirty years since she wrote 'The House of Mirth',
Wharton comments in her autobiography about its composition:

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 respect should a society of irresponsible
pleasure seekers be said to have, on the "old woe of
the world", any deeper bearing that the people
composing such a society could guess? The
answer was that a frivolous society can acquire
dramatic significance only through its frivolity
destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power
of debasing people and ideals. The answer,
in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart.35

This is precisely what happens in the case of Lily.
She is destroyed by the frivolity of the society whose narrow
notions of propriety are crippling and perverse. Lily is a
typical product of her heredity, environment and the historical
moment. She is at the mercy of every suggestion of her immediate
environment, and she responds to those influences in her own
characteristic way. As Wharton portrays her:

Inherited tendencies had combined with
early training to make her the highly
specialised product she was: an organism
as helpless out of its narrow range as the
sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had
been fashioned to adorn and delight; to
what does she come when nature round the rose-
leaf and paint the humming-bird’s breast?
And was it her fault that the purely
decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously
fulfilled among social beings than in the world
of nature? That is not to be hampered by
moral scruples or complicated by
material necessities.
Every word in this passage is weighty and it reveals Wharton's indignation at the social set-up which nearly kills the better spirit in woman. Inherited tendencies and early training conspire each other and hinder woman from achieving mature self-hood. Wharton found that the American women are not free to choose the course by which they can fulfil their emotional and intellectual aspirations. Unlike the typical feminist who envisage radical changes in economic opportunities and political freedom as preliminary step to female liberation, Wharton tentatively suggests that women can liberate themselves even in a male-dominated society, if the elementary standard of sexual justice is provided for them. But unfortunately this sexual justice remains a will-O'-the-wisp and her heroine's attempts to become strong and independent never become fruitful. She repeatedly questions the validity of a society which does not recognize the privileges and responsibilities of women and accept their existence as adult human beings. The American society views woman as an extension of her husband's ego and her social role is limited to an ostensible and artistic display of her husband's wealth.

It is this concept of woman, which hinders them from enjoying mature self-hood, that Wharton brings to severe criticism in The House of Mirth. As Elizabeth Ammons points out an average leisure class woman is a "human chattel with an ornamental function." She is a symbol; symbol of her husband's wealth, rather than an individual. Lily is trained to be a beautiful object and fails to rise above this restricted view point.
It may be keeping this point in her mind that Wharton first titled her novel as *A Moment's Ornament*. Raymond B العدوit even goes to the extent of suggesting that this discarded title is more relevant than the chosen title. 38 One cannot be sure of the relative merit of the two titles but the discarded title of *The House of Mirth* evidently and ostensibly brings out Wharton's main target of attack and indicates where her heroines tragedy lies. There is no place which can answer the woman and the spirit that she is and nothing can fulfill her personal aspirations. Society is one sided and it is this one sidedness that Wharton belligerently scrutinizes in her novels. The New York society provides no vista of experience which sufficiently bridges the real self and the expected self of its members. As a result Lily fails to achieve what Irving Howe so nicely terms "the core of personal being". 39

As we are told in the opening movement of the novel Lily's mother has only one consolation and that is 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 core in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt. She watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian, and she tried to instill into the latter a sense of the responsibility that such a charge involved. 40

This is the environment in which Lily was brought up and which shaped her character and fate. Though it is not
points at the center stage. On the surface level at least, Lily's decorative role as a beautiful object as well as her objectification in the novel's portrayal of Lily's beauty are crucial to the novel's exploration of beauty and identity. As such, beauty plays a central role in determining the fate of Lily and her relationship with society. This beauty, or at least the way it is perceived, is what kinship and identity as a beautiful object. 

Lily's decorative role as a beautiful object, however, is not without consequences. As the novel progresses, Lily's beauty becomes a weapon against her and society. The beauty that once was a source of pride and strength becomes a tool of manipulation and control. This shift in perception is evident in the way Lily is depicted in the novel. Initially, she is seen as a symbol of beauty and freedom, but as the novel progresses, her beauty is used against her and society. This shift in perception is evident in the way Lily is depicted in the novel. Initially, she is seen as a symbol of beauty and freedom, but as the novel progresses, her beauty is used against her and society. This shift in perception is evident in the way Lily is depicted in the novel. Initially, she is seen as a symbol of beauty and freedom, but as the novel progresses, her beauty is used against her and society. This shift in perception is evident in the way Lily is depicted in the novel. 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whenever she does it she is faced with a new problem which finally amounts to her social destruction.

In the very first scene of the novel we see Lily sitting in Lawrance Selden's apartment who muses herself: "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman". It is a miserable thing to be a woman not only for Lily, but for all other women in The House of Mirth. Here Wharton examines the poignant dilemma of the young American woman who longs for an independent existence but whose only option is marriage. Her answer "I suppose so. What else is there?" to Selden's question, Isn't marriage your vocation?" shows her helplessness. Further she comments "There's a difference - a girl must, (marry) a man may if he chooses." A man can live without a woman, but a woman cannot live without the financial support of a man. In such a society no woman can function without submitting her personal identity to the more dominant cultural value of the mercantile society. This system makes her a relentless competitor for acquiring the money and favour of some rich men. The open feud between Bertha Dorset and Lily Bart in The House of Mirth and between May Welland and Ellen Olenska in Ethan Frome illustrates this point. Again we get the cold rivalry between Mattie Silver and Soona Frome in Ethan Frome for the love and support, both financial and moral, of Ethan.

But unfortunately Lily fails to make a financially rich marriage, and ends her life in a dim and empty security.
cause of her failure is within herself. That she needs a very rich husband in order to escape from her present dimuness is true, but she is not ready to marry a rich man for his riches' sake. Her preference is for "an English nobleman with political ambitions and vast estates; or, for second choice, an Italian prince with a castle in the Appennines and an hereditary office in the Vatican." 45

Lily wants money and the only way open to her is to sell her beauty and charm to the highest bidder. But Lily is not ready to do it. She wants independence. Marriage invariably means selling her freedom for the enjoyment of others. And she thoughtfully refrains herself from such a commitment and her tragedy lies there. Elizabeth Ammons is absolutely correct in saying that The House of Mirth shows, "the pitfall of not marrying in a culture that demands marriage of a respectable young woman." 46

It is this mental dilemma and vulnerability to take lucrative decisions that ultimately paves the way for her death, both socially and physically. Lily understands fully the social role to which she is destined and from the first page of the novel she is hard at work in giving pleasure to other people. She is an expert in the social art which consists of dressing well, serving tea properly and receiving and making visits gracefully. She is an excellent dryad in the drawing room.47 "She felt the pride of a skillfull operator," 48 and she "had the art of giving self-confidence to the embarrassed." 49 Hence, at least on the surface, Lily perfectly embodies society's ideal of the female as a
decorate piece of art and as a subservient, dependent and docile member of society. But the tragic flaw in Lily is that this ideal social norm is limited to the surface of her character and that she silently rebels against it. She transgresses the limited social regulations and pays a visit to Gelden's bachelor apartment. She falls deeply into gambling debts and accepts money from a married man, Gus Trenor. She does all this because she had "fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself."\(^50\)

Thus Lily is both a traditional conformist and a natural rebel against the system which produced her.

As R.H. Lawson concludes "The tragedy of Lily Bart in The House of Mirth is the direct result of a hereditary inability to cope, visited on her as an epigonal bourgeois."\(^51\)

But at the same time she is the victim of a schizophrenic split in her identity. She struggles hard to cope up with the materialistic society but fails because of this schizophrenic split and ambivalent nature of her character. Wharton's comment through Mrs. Fisher:

That is Lily all over, you know. She works like a slave preparing ground and sowing her seeds; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic... and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she is trying for.\(^52\)

obviously explicates this ambivalence of her nature. She is reluctant to marry without money but at the same time
She is unwilling to marry without love. Grant C. Knight observes in this connection.

Lily Bart's problem was that of the independent marrigeable female without money enough to attract an ambitious husband, without talent enough to support herself, and without character enough to snap the golden chain which bound her to relatives and friends who supplied her with the luxuries in setting and clothing she craved.53

This schizophrenic schism in Lily's character is perhaps what lifts The House of Mirth from a mere social satire to a moral tragedy. Forces of good and evil contend within her mind. And her conflict between society and self becomes a desperate battle between the public persona and the buried self. This struggle of the two selves, one personal and the other social, reciprocally destroys each other; but yet her personal self emerges victorious towards the end of the novel. She keeps this personal self to herself and lets nobody to glimpse at it. "... her personal fastidiousness had a moral equivalent and when she made a tour of inspection in her own mind there were certain closed doors she did not open."54

This schizophrenic split becomes more evident when she faces a moral dilemma and when her mind becomes a battle ground for good and evil. Part of the drama in the novel arises from Lily's attempt to overcome the evil that is a part of herself. She falls an easy victim to the scandal of a morally unscrupulous woman, Berth Dorset. This scandal wrecks her social life totally, though she was wholly innocent.
For a time she planned to carry out her project of blackmail and use the love letters written by Bertha Dorset to Selden which chance had put into her hands in order to effect her social rehabilitation. She muses:

What debt did she owe to the social order which had condemned and banished her without trial? She had never been heard in her own defence; she was innocent of the charge on which she had been found guilty; and the irregularity of her conviction might seem to justify the use of methods as irregular in recovering her lost rights. Bertha Dorset, to save herself, had not scrupled to ruin her by an open falsehood; why should she hesitate to make private use of the facts that chance had put in her way? 

Call it a blackmail and it becomes unthinkable; but explain that it injures no one, 

Had she carried out this project she would have committed, in Margaret B. Mc Dowell's phrase, "a kind of moral suicide" in order to survive in the physical and social world. That she throws the letters into fire gives her a moral victory. Hence, Wagenknecht is right when he says that "Lily is not punished for her sins but for her virtues."

The American society is such that it demands only an ostensible virtue. Social life is a game and one has to play the game according to the rule, no matter how wicked one is. The society almost conforms to the Sumnerian idea that the social mores which are evolved by usage as the fittest to secure general welfare, is more important than absolute moral values. For an individual in society mores always represent the struggle to live as well as possible.
under the existing conditions. The more thoroughly the individual conforms to it, the more surely he will receive social advancement. But Lily cannot do this because she is above it. As Maxwell points out "from some mysterious source she has inherited qualities and longings alien to the Philistine aristocracy." It is this mysterious longing which compels her to act selflessly and according to the moral choice that contribute greatly to her destruction. Even at the moment of her death she uses her little inheritance from her aunt to pay off her debt to Gus Trenor rather than to start a new life.

The double standard of sexual morality, which Wharton so emphatically disapproves, once again becomes evident in The Reef. It is the most Jamesian of all novels of Wharton and Henry James himself praised it for its psychological unity and intensity. It is true that Wharton makes an elaborate study of the psychic process of Anna Leath and Sophy Viner, the two principal characters of the novel. But apart from this Wharton carefully analyses the social relation of females and strongly disapproves the double standard of sexual morality inherent in the New York aristocracy.

When the novel opens Anna Leath, who is the owner of the secluded French Chateau called 'Givre', is in her late thirties. Like May Welland of The Age of Innocence she perfectly embodies the lady-like repression of emotion. Though a married lady, she is a perfect little girl - the American
expectation of an ideal wife. Now her husband is dead and her heart burns with the passion for George Barrow, an American diplomat. But her plan to marry George does not materialize because she learns that he and Sophy Viner has had an earlier 'affair' in Paris. The knowledge is all the more painful because Sophy and her stepson Owen Leath, are already engaged.

Though in her late thirties, Anna Leath is not an emotionally matured woman. Like all other heroines of Wharton she also grew up in Old New York which preferred child-woman to adult human beings. She dutifully denies herself the emotions and desires which her elders asked her not to feel and express. This artificial repression of emotion has a far reaching consequence upon her psyche. In her sub-conscious mind she idealizes those passions which she wants to understand and experience in reality. She knows that the life she has been leading has not been real and she hopes that love "would one day release her from this spell of unreality." She looks forward to marriage "as passion in action, romance converted to reality." But unfortunately the reverse happens in the case of Anna.

At the time of her marriage with Fraser Leath, Anna thought that she had found her liberator who would lead her to her idealized world of romance. But immediately after marriage she was proved to be wrong and her idealized dreams to be illusory. Even her husband's kiss could not evoke passionate impulses and desires in her heart which she suppressed.
so long. Instead her husband's mechanical kisses "dropped on her like a cold smooth pebble".61

Though disappointed in the first marriage Anna still holds the view that the love of the right man is the panacea for all her problems. In The Reef Wharton attacks the American notion that a child-woman will, at the time of her marriage, almost immediately shed off her innocence, and experience all the mysteries connected with sexuality. Anna's identity with the system which produced her is so strong that even though she failed in her first attempt she blames the man, not the society which produced her. Now her husband is dead and she eagerly looks forward to marriage with her old acquaintance, George Darrow. The prospects of Darrow's arrival arouses all the repressed emotions and she anticipates their union:

Just such a latent animation glowed in Anna Leath. In every nerve and vein she was conscious of that equipoise of bliss which the fearful human heart scarce dares acknowledge. She was not used to strong or full emotions; but she had always known that she should not be afraid of them. She was not afraid now; but she felt a deep inward stillness.62

Exactly at this point Anna learns about George's short affair with her would-be daughter-in-law, Sophy Viner. Anna can no longer idealize her lover and her heart is subjected to intense inner conflicts. Her attitude towards Sophy is ambivalent: love and jealousy over-power alternatively. The ambivalence in Anna's attitude towards Sophy prompts even a
seasoned critic as Margaret B. Mc Dowell to comment that Anna never accepts Sophy as a human being. Mc Dowell's observation:

Anna's condemnation of Sophy does not reflect pharsaical sexual or class propriety on Edith Wharton's part - so much as her recognition that, in 1912, Anna, like most strictly reared women, still lived in a Victorian world where "people with emotion were not visited". Though presented as a woman of charm and grace, Anna remains a prisoner of inhibitions, narcissism, and rigid mores. Like May Archer in The Age of Innocence, Anna is passionate, jealous, and possessive in her love; and, like May, she is both limited and protected by convention. 63

takes us to the heart of the matter and brings out Wharton's essential criticism of the American society.

That Anna is a typical American child-woman and that conventional inhibition of emotions is a part of her is true, but whether she accepts Sophy as a human being or not is a matter of doubt. Anna is a "victim of an overly repressive, highly artificial social system." 64 She does not approve individuality in woman and does not endorse the emotional freedom Sophy enjoys before her marriage. Anna is greatly shocked when she learns of Sophy's brief affair with Darrow, but the intensity of the horror, as Elizabeth Ammons notes, "springs from the realization that the double standard not only justifies careless sexual encounters for men but, worse, deception and contempt for women as a group." 65
This double standard of morality, which Louis Auchincloss so emphatically declared and advised the reader that "before opening The Reef the reader must be prepared for a moral climate in which extra-marital love is considered damming to woman and only mildly reprehensible to a man," becomes clear in George Darrow's attitude towards Sophy's marriage with Owen. Darrow is the co-partner in the social sin of flirting with Sophy and he is equally responsible in the moral sin of adultery, but he strongly opposes Owen's intention to marry Sophy who has a dubious past. It may be because of his self interest and class consciousness but he cannot evade the guilt of approving the double standard of sexual morality which endorses one punishment for man and another for woman for the same sin.

But Anna Leath does not approve this double standard. Her reasoning about Darrow's affair:

(Darrow) had come to her with an open face and a clear conscience - come to her from this! (the affair). If his security was the security of falsehood it was horrible, if it meant that he had forgotten it is worse.

proves this. How can Darrow so easily clean his consciousness from such an ignoble act? Either Darrow is lying to her or he is such type of a man with whom real friendship is impossible. The moment when George confesses his affair with Sophy, Anna fears that he might be in love with Sophy although he affirms in the negative. When Sophy frankly admits that she wanted the affair it becomes obvious for Anna that even if George felt no love for Sophy, Sophy was
in love with him.

Anna cannot believe that a past experience is limited to the past. For her it must necessarily have its repercussions in the present. Anna is not at all reassured when Darrow approaches the affair in a light-hearted manner. Her love for Darrow burns within her and she vacillates between her love for Darrow and her hatred of him. Much of the mental trauma which Anna undergoes in the course of the novel relegates to this vacillation and her rejection of the double standard of the sexual morality which her society approved.

Wharton always approved the social and economic discrimination. Most of her earlier novels deal with the disparity in social and economic values. She always believed that monetary status must go hand in hand with the traditions of blue blood. The American aristocratic society accepted the invaders with their aboriginal culture into their fold, but at the same time maintained a separate personal and economic reality for its women. Wharton disapproved this sexual discrimination and throughout her fiction she decries against it.
CHAPTER III

HUMAN RELATIONSHIP: MARRIAGE