CHAPTER IV

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Edith Wharton's fiction can be conveniently summed up as the chronicle of the decline and fall of New York's old traditional aristocracy, after it was invaded by the 'new rich' barbarians. The traditional aristocracy of the pre-assault era cherished the advantages of noble birth and cared as little as possible about money-making. But, in the dawn of the twentieth century, Wharton realized that the social system predominant in New York was one which revolved not around the aristocracy of birth but around the 'central sun of gold.'

In all her fiction, Wharton documents this social change and shows how it affected women's status. Sometimes she goes beyond mere documentation and expresses her own personal views on the role of women in society. Throughout her career, spreading over more than half a century, Wharton wrote about diverse problems that women encounter in society. She has portrayed the problems of marriage, extra-marital affairs and has recorded clearly the degree of public acceptance of divorce, over the decades. But her views on these problems are not entirely consistent. Even stories and novels published in the same year dealing with these problems present different points of view. It seems that she tends to adopt a realistic view on these subjects, considering the moral implications of the individual situations presented in each work.
Wharton repeatedly questions the validity and sanctity of women's voluntary submission to the restrictions imposed upon her by the male dominated society. But her final comment on women's relationship in their world would seem to be that they purchase freedom at great risk within a relatively static society. Wharton's preference is towards the direction of more flexible and dynamic social order in which women can be active agents. She always remained sensitive to the problems of women as they existed in a society which was indifferent to their well-being and which did not recognize their existence as human beings capable of enjoying adult privileges and responsibilities.

The role of tradition and how it blocked the road of women's journey towards self-fulfilment is Wharton's favourite theme. At least in her earlier novels, she had been inclined to identify tradition with one form of repression or other. Gradually her attitude towards tradition began to change. In the pre-world war American society she attacked tradition for the negative role it enacted upon exceptional individuals. All her novels written in this period are mostly concerned with the extra-ordinary women's desire for self-fulfilment and their confrontation with the demeaning traditional norms of suppressed femininity. The dominant question that these stories raise is how an extra-ordinary woman can fulfil herself within a relatively rigid social structure which prefers the child-women concept. The first World War shattered that rigid social
convention and replaced it with a chaotic, libertine social order which idealized the baby-doll flappers. In the subsequent novels, written in the post World War I American society as its milieu, Wharton changed her attitude as a result of the change in the environment. If the rigid social norms of pre-World War America was murderous for exceptional women, the coercive social order of post-World War society was even worse.

Wharton's sober trips to the blood besmeared France during the first World War gave her a new insight into the role of tradition. She became aware of the inseparable relationship between tradition and individual human growth.

Society is not a portmanteau collection of individuals but it is a system of sanctions, customs and beliefs evolved from generations of living together. It is this system that conditions individuals to sacrifice their personal aspirations in moments of crises. There are subtle bonds between individual and the social mores and tradition is the matrix within which individual personality is defined. It is a delicate frame-work of familiarities and understandings by which man's sense of self is confirmed and reconfirmed in his many daily encounters. Thus tradition is not something external to the individual, but it is an integral element in his personality.

Her post-war experiences taught Wharton that the primary function of tradition is not to suppress and limit individual
freedom and growth, but to give him a sense of continuity in a world of flux. This was her conclusion after her tour through the embattled France in 1915. As she writes in *Fighting France*:

The war has shown the world what are the real values of France. Never for an instant has this people, so expert in the great art of living, imagined that life consisted in living alive. Enamoured of pleasure and beauty, dwelling freely and frankly in the present, they have yet kept their sense of larger meanings, have understood life to be made up of many things past and to come, of renunciation as well as satisfaction, of traditions as well as experiments, of dying as much as of living. Never have they considered life as a thing to be cherished in itself, apart from its reaction and its relations.

Life consists not only in living alone but it is made up of many things, past and future. In her most representative works, Wharton cherishes the idea of tradition and the need of viable cultural mores. The relation between individual human identity and cultural tradition is a frequent theme of Wharton and she continually argues the necessity of individual's commitment to the cultural tradition to which he belongs. But ironically enough the chief characters of Wharton are traditional non-conformists. Through her earlier novels she portrayed tradition as a killer killing the finer spirits of individuals. Her negative attitude towards tradition underwent a thorough change after the painful experiences of the war and, especially in her later novels, she seems to have endorsed the role of tradition in preserving the individual's sense of integrity.
Thus Wharton's artistic treatment of the theme of tradition usually involves two methods: first is to dramatise the importance of men over the finely knit web of culture, manners and mores which enclose them and secondly to warn the disaster in store for those who destroy this delicate web in a radical obsession to reform it. Her chief characters can be classified into either of categories. In the earlier novels she sympathised with her characters who fought their emotional battle with the cultural tradition, but in her later novels, though she depicted the struggle, her approach to the theme is that of a traditional conformist. This ambivalent attitude towards the role of tradition is ever present in her fiction.

After the First World War Wharton felt that civilization was disintegrating. Sudden upheavals in the traditional values often result in the disintegration of the existing values and it is harmful for civilization. On the other hand tradition sometimes becomes dead, not accommodating even the slightest innovation. Midway between the two Wharton cherishes the idea of a tradition which is not affected by sudden upheavals like war, revolution etc. but at the same appreciating mild and long-time changes. Her ambivalence towards the role of tradition results from such a notion.

The ethical concern of Wharton's fiction is mainly the individual's relation with his society. Her most congenial
theme, thus, emerges as the struggle of some exceptional individuals with the standards and conventions of their respective class. These exceptional individuals are pitted against the rigid conventions of a small social group and she measures the amount of human loss caused by national barbarity.

F.T. Cooper observes that the complications of Wharton's tragedies arise from "the impossibility of ever wholly getting inside another person's mind;" on the one hand and on the other, "from the realization that one cannot escape from one's environment, that one's whole family and race have for generations been relentlessly weaving a network of custom and precedent too strong for the individual to break." Most of Wharton's characters try to escape from the limitations imposed by their immediate environment and in the end they come to the painful realization that individual aspirations are nothing weighed against the social mores. The Valley of Decision, Wharton's first attempt at historical novel, depicts this recurring theme. It centres on the conflict between the individual's need for freedom and the inevitable loss of some of that freedom in order to live in an organized society. The problematic relation between self and society in The Valley of Decision becomes a desperate battle between culturally inspired goals and socially prescribed means of attaining it. The novel is set in eighteenth century Italy and it tells the story of Odo Valsecca and Fulvia Vivaldi sacrificing their happiness to the obligations of social rank. Odo Valsecca, a blue-blood, shares
all the intellectual and political aspirations of his time. After being exposed to the violent contrasts in the lives of his countrymen he becomes the Duke of Pianura and tries to bring about greater liberty and better living conditions for his people. Inspired by the frescoes on the walls of a deserted family chapel he develops sympathetic love for the poor and a heroic desire for martial adventure.

But, once in office, Odo learns that his noblest efforts to bring about the basic social changes will not bear fruit in his given situation. His struggle with the society starts here. Odo's earnest attempts to alleviate the condition of the peasants are resisted by the very people for whom it is meant because it curtails the privileges of the clergy and the nobility. Habitual reverence for the past tradition proves that such a change will be impossible. Later Odo understands that with his revolutionary ideals even his very existence as the Duke is in danger. He can continue in power only by complicity and intrigue with the nobles of his court. He has to purchase their support by granting them many illegal privileges. Every attempt to cause their displeasure will inevitably end in his dethronement. Even within himself Odo feels the pressure of the conflict between his idealistic aspirations and the aesthetic glamour that surrounds his social status.

He had known moments of happiness . . . when his opportunities had seemed as boundless as his dreams, and he had not yet learned that the sovereign's power may be a kind of spiritual prison to the man. Since then, indeed, he had known another kind of happiness . . . but this was when he had realized that he lived in a
prison, and had begun to admire the sumptuous adornment of its walls."

Odo is able to conquer the base aspirations within himself but the combined pressure of the existing social order demeans him and he feels that the "vast noiseless labor of the spirit going on everywhere beneath the social surface."\(^5\)

Not only is Odo's desire for providing better living condition for the poor fails, but even his love for his sweet-heart, Fulvia Vivaldi, is frustrated. By having ascended to the throne of the Duke of Pianura Odo has to forgo his love for Fulvia and has to make a marriage of the state. Though, willingly or unwillingly, he adjusts with such an unhappy situation for the sake of pursuing his individual aspiration for social reform, Odo never enjoys mental happiness. Eventually Fulvia returns to him, only to die in a mutiny by a bullet meant for Odo.

Wharton subordinates her love story to the spirit of the historical fiction. The central theme of *The Valley of Decision* is provided by the background in which Odo Valsecca and Fulvia Vivaldi live.

Unlike the other novelists of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who depicted society as a potential threat to individuality, Wharton portrays society as a prison. In Garry H. Linderberg's words:
Society functions as a prison in her fiction, not because the individual, "trailing clouds of glory," has accidentally fallen into it, nor because he is being tested by exposure to its confines, but because he has been born and reared in it; he learns to perceive reality through the bars of a cage."

Society appears in her fiction as a cage, the traditions of which no individual can break. The more adventurously he encounters the limited notion of the society the more painfully he realizes how well he is confined within it. Thus Wharton's major subject is the effects of social organization on the individual, especially on the weaker sex. She measures these effects by pitting an exceptional individual against the hostile society and thematically her fiction raises the question how the social manners limit the life of the individual spirit.

Outwardly Wharton's plots concentrate on the issues related to marriage, divorce, extra-marital affairs and the problems resulting from the movement through different social classes. As a result at least a few critics of Wharton contend that her fictional world is crowded with the trivial doings of the trivial people. But Wharton relates her trivial theme to a moral crisis and objectively analyses the role of morality in shaping one's character.

The House of Mirth can be viewed as Wharton's indignant protest against a social system which does not permit individuals to carry on their prospective life with absolute freedom of spirit. The exceptional individuals in Wharton's fiction are mainly women and her male characters are rather reluctant to free themselves from the social tradition. The main character
pattern of her fiction is an unloved woman and a reluctant hero who fails to come to terms with the object of his love and his immediate surroundings. In such a social order women are the chief sufferers and they have either to perish or to adapt themselves with the social mores.

Two distinct patterns can be evolved from Wharton's fiction regarding her attitude towards the role of tradition. On the one hand, traditional mores are so restricting on the individuals that they fail to come to terms with their inner life. On the other hand, Wharton does not clearly evidence a viable alternative. Especially after the war, Wharton's attitude towards the role of social mores changed considerably.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Wharton lived two lives: one before, and another after, the First World War. During the war years Wharton's life was surrounded by personal losses. A few of her close friends died on the war front. The death of Henry James in 1916 was too much for her heart. To crown all these, after the unhappy experiences of the war, Edith found herself existing in a void. Living the life of a permanent expatriate in France she found losing the very ground on which her dear old America was built up. Earlier she could enjoy contacts with the American tradition through her friends and well-wishers, but after the war communication was practically nil and she felt the American tradition withering away. The old traditional values were being replaced by a new
flexible social order in which nothing was of any permanent value. In those changed circumstances Wharton felt herself being cut-off from her cultural world. She could not find any permanent interest in the new world values and at times she began to cherish the old social values, for it provided at least a sense of continuity to its members. Wharton's ambivalent attitude towards traditional norms is thus demarcated by the great war. But this ambivalence is slightly evident even in her earlier novels. Wharton loved her New York to the core of her heart, but at the same time she devastatingly criticized it for its frivolities. This attitude towards her society, which was half-way between hatred and love enabled her to present the social life more truthfully than any other novelist of manners. Neither does she fully approve nor totally reject the existing pattern. One can roughly say that in her pre-World War novels it is towards negation and in the post-World War novels it is towards an affirmation of the (now lost) moral values. The Age of Innocence and the old New York group of novelettes form another category. Although they are written after Wharton's world war experiences, their social milieu is the New York society of her early teens - the New York society which provided the stuff of her best novels.

What raises The House of Mirth above the other novels of manners is Wharton's ambivalent attitude towards her society's manners. Critics often blame Lily Bart for not making firm moral decisions suitable to her individual aspiration.
No doubt Lily's actions are noted for inertia rather than violence. Her problem is partly within herself and partly because of her creator's ambivalent attitude towards the ultimate significance of what she is trying for.

It is true that Lily Bart is "one of the gayest and saddest of the spoiled", "a fragile butterfly whose wings crumble at a touch." In the social sea she is tossed helplessly as a cork in a whirl pool. It is the ambiguity in Lily's character and conflict between her practical good sense and the pull of the spirit that result in her downfall. As J. Lidcliff rightly observes, throughout the novel Lily Bart remains as a "sleeping Beauty," slumbering in a dormant presexual state from which she never awakens. She is unable to move towards integration and remains imprisoned in an emotional state of primary narcissism. She fuses her feelings and desires with the outside world and this fusion thwarts her progress towards self maturity. Unfortunately Lily's feelings and spiritual desires are at loggerheads with the social norms and her attempts at an organic fusion of these two opposing values result in an ambivalent attitude towards society. Heredity and environment teach her that she should follow a set behavioural pattern. This inherited tendency is so strong that she cannot break away with it. But, at the same time, the pull of her spirit shapes a moral attitude towards society in which individual freedom is of utmost importance. Both these conflicting values within herself and as a result she is socially spoiled. Had Lily's spirit been more in tune with her society, the novel might
have ended in her practical victory over the cunning people
who conspired for her social destruction. But such a victory
would not have made Lily Bart anyway superior to the others.
The moral victory of Lily Bart lies in the fact that she is
able to conquer the base cultural attitudes that inhibited
her.

Just before her death Lily contemplates the meaning of
her existence:

. . . She saw that there had never been a
time when she had any relation to life. Her
parents too had been rootless, flown hither
and thither on every wind of fashions,
without any personal existence or shelter
than 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. In whatever from
a slowly accumulated past lives in the blood -
whether in the concreate image of the old house
stored with visual memories, or in the
conception of the house not built with hands,
but made up of inherited passions and loyalties -
it has the same power of broadening and
deepening the individual existence, of
attaching it by mysterious links of kinship
to all the mighty sum of human striving.

The crucial effect of Lily's rootlessness is her (and her
creator's) inconsistent approach to morality. As hinted
earlier, Lily fully knows that the only means available for
her to fulfil her ambition is to marry a rich man. So many
chances come in her way to make a lucrative marriage but each
time she is unable, at the last minute, to act purely on her mercenary motives. As Wharton repeatedly suggests there are two Lily's, the schemer and the idealist. Her schemes to achieve her ambitions have the full support of her materialistic environment. But in the last moment her idealism refrains her from reaping the harvest of what she has been trying for. Again the idealism of Lily is the result of her dream of romantic love. She feels that love would one day redeem her and would defeat the influence of the base world.

As a contrast to Lily's idealism Wharton provides evidence for her vanity and love for luxury. Lily was always "inspired by the prospect of showing her beauty in public," and whenever she saw some jewel she felt that they perfectly symbolized "the life she longed to lead, the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting for her own jewel-like rareness."

Thus the root cause of Lily's rootlessness and solitude is the struggle within herself between worldly ambition and moral and romantic idealism. Even in this confused state caused by rootlessness, vanity and isolation, Lily's character holds up remarkably well under severe tests. Although good many chances had come in her way to take vengeance upon her rivals and thereby protect her status in society, Lily keeps aloof from doing so. The moment she throws into fire the love letters written by Bertha Dorset to Lawrence Selden,
She achieves a moral victory over her society's traditional norm which encouraged practical good sense.

Though born and brought up in a cultural attitude that demeaned her finer spirits, Lily Bart thus subsides the cultural inhibition imposed upon her. Yet it is a mistake to think that Wharton conceived Lily as a paragon of virtues. Half way through the novel Lily Bart remains to be a typical product of her environment with a slight rebellious spirit. Inherited tendencies and 'early training' make the typical product as she is and she more or less accepts the society's definition of her. Towards the end of the novel we find Lily struggling hard to subdue that part of her nature which is no way better than her culture. In this struggle she emerges victorious and the poignancy of her tragedy lies in the fact that when she frees herself from the strain of her culture she finds no existence in it. The irony of her fate is that she can find existence nowhere else. Lily Bart frees herself from the illusory identity she maintained within her social class but when she falls from the circle to which she originally belonged, she understands that she has no being at all. As Wharton comments:

If one were not a part of the season's fixed routine, one swung unsphered in a void of social non-existence. Lily, for all her dissatisfied dreamings had never really conceived the possibility of revolving about a different centre; it was easy enough to despise the world, but decidedly difficult to find any other habitable region.
Although Lily escapes from the limited notions of her social world she never enters a different world. Even the millinery shop in which she joins as working girl serves only the Trenor world.

In the penultimate scene before her accidental death Lily touches, if not enters, the periphery of another world within her own social circle. Discarded by everybody and with no support to fall back on, Lily is discovered by Nettie Struthers, one of the girls whom Lily had helped at Gerty's club for young women in distress. Nettie was a prostitute who has now become a housewife. Lily goes to her apartment and into the warmth of her kitchen. There she is allowed to hold Nettie's newborn baby in her own hands. This is the most poignant scene in *The House of Mirth*. The passage describes Lily holding Nettie's baby:

The baby, feeling herself detached from her habitual anchorage, made an instinctive motion of resistance; but the soothing influences of digestion prevailed, and Lily felt the soft weight sink trustfully against her breast. The child's confidence in its safety thrilled her with a sense of warmth and returning life, and she bent over, wondering at the rosy blur of the little face, the empty clearness of the eyes, the vague tendril motions of the folding and unfolding fingers. At first the burden in her arms seemed as light as a pink cloud or a heap of down, but as she continued to hold it the weight increased, sinking deeper, and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and became a part of herself."
Wharton, herc, is not making any tentative suggestion that Lily would have been happier had she chosen the life of poverty and motherhood. No image of Lily as wife is possible in the imaginative world of the novel. Moreover marriage is not a solution to Lily's psychic problem. Wharton is well aware of this and this may be the reason why she did not care to portray a male character who would support Lily's spiritual aspirations. Dividing the essential qualities of an ideal husband among various male characters, Wharton has not created a hero whom Lily would choose to marry. She likes some qualities in Selden but he does not fulfill all her expectations. Though Simon Rosedale is portrayed as a vulgar character, he also enjoys some admirable qualities. Selden shares some of the ideals of Lily, but fails to come to terms with the materialistic aspects of life. It is true that Lily and Selden love each other, but their love can exist only in an idealistic world.

The only male character in *The House of Mirth* who is realistic in his daily behaviour is Simon Rosedale. Structurally, Wharton suggests that Rosedale would be a proper mate for Lily but Lily's attitude towards him is ambivalent. As Karl Miller observes Rosedale as a dark Jewish foreigner attracts as well as repels Lily. But ironically enough Simon Rosedale is the only man who is genuinely kind to Lily and who openly professes his love for her. He does not confuse the language of money and love. He talks of money when he means money, and
love when he means love. But Lily can never love Rosedale and her attitude towards him is cloathed in an inherent hatred. She shrinks "in every nerve from the way in which his look and tone made free of her", and she draws "away instinctively from his touch." Both do not share psychological intimacy and when Rosedale's smile grew increasingly intimate she withdraws with a repugnance which kept her in frozen greatness. 15

At times Golden's love seems to elevate Lily to the heights of her romantic imagination but she also is inhibited by the same fears that constrain Lily. Love is not a cure-all capable of rectifying the wrong doings of an ill-managed society. It is only an appetite, a spiritual need springing from life's most material aspects. But it is only one of the several needs. One needs love to live properly, but one cannot live properly on love alone.

This is the problem that Lily faces in The House of Mirth. She wants love and spiritual sustenance coupled with material comforts. The society fails to provide her both on the same line. She could have got spiritual sustenance by forgoing the material comforts, but she is unwilling to do so. She could have enjoyed material benefits by marrying Rosedale, but she has to bury her spiritual aspirations within herself. Her heart always yearns for a social order which would sufficiently bridge the gulf between spirit and matter.
THE REPUBLIC OF THE SPIRIT.

Mrs. Wharton's concept of an ideal society centres around the importance given to the spiritual and emotional life of its members. Frustrated by her husband's inability to share her emotional life, Wharton formed a group of people, whom she called the members of the 'inner circle', who could discuss intellectual and emotional problems frankly. They shared the same interests, formed almost identical views on life and respected each other's views reciprocally. In her own life the membership to this charmed circle was limited to a few intellectuals, but her fictional world offers a vaster vista which Lawrence Selden in The House of Mirth christens as the "republic of the spirit." The passport to this republic is not limited to any individual or to any special group. It is an international society which embraces all the 'charmed circles' existing anywhere in the world as well as isolated individuals having certain minimum qualifications. The citizens of "the republic of the spirit" are intelligent, cultured individuals who, regardless of their age, sex, and nationality have the same interests and enjoy a sense of oneness among them.

The republic of the spirit is an open but naturally exclusive society of persons with refined sensibility and sophisticated intelligence. They are free from the limitations imposed by both poverty and riches. In Wharton's fictional
world only a very few characters can claim citizenship in the republic of the spirit. Even Lawrence Selden, the formator of the idea cannot seek full membership to it.

Blake Novius offers full citizenship to the "republic of the spirit" to Lawrence Selden, Ellen Olenska, Justine Brent and John Amherst. Lily Bart, Ralph Marvell, Newland Archer, Anna Leath, Vance Weston (Hudson River Bracketed), and Lewis Rayclle (False Dawn), he says, instinctively belongs to it but "through a conspiracy of circumstances never quite succeeds in being admitted." 16

Blake seems to have made a mistake in offering citizenship to Selden, Ellen, Justine and Amherst. The only character who can claim citizenship in the republic of the spirit is Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence. Lily Bart also, in her imaginative illusion, crosses the boundary of it. The penultimate scene in The House of Mirth where Lily "formerly Nettie Struther's child is a symbolic representation of the kind of life which would sustain her. Here Wharton is not merely endorsing the importance of motherhood. Our attention is directed beyond the biological fact of motherhood as a means of continuity to an intuitive understanding of the importance of organic unity and natural kinship. The passage, quoted earlier, reminds us, as Richard Poirier observes, "of the factitious social unities throughout the rest of the novel, of alliances held together by the power of money and the shared hypocracies that constitute a standard for the exclusion of Lily." 17
In the society in which Lily has been living, there has been no spontaneous enactment of human solidarity. Compassion and kinship are entirely lacking in the world of The House of Mirth. The implication of the metaphorical description of the scene is that mutual sympathy and recognition of human destinies shall be the basis for kinship and continuity.

"The baby, feeling herself detached from her habitual anchorage, made an instinctive motion of resistance." But this instinctive motion of resistance, sooner or later, surrenders to a desire for human warmth and unity.

Throughout her life Lily had lacked compassion and love. In the frivolous social world of The House of Mirth she makes an "instinctive motion of resistance" to free herself from the limitations imposed upon her. In her social life Lily fails to get the soothing influences of kinship that Nettie's baby enjoys while sinking against her breast.

Nettie's story, on the one hand, dramatizes Wharton's ideal concept of domesticity and illustrates a contrast to Lily's rootlessness. Nettie's story begins with seduction and abandonment and ends in fertile domestic happiness. She gives Lily her "first glimpse of the continuity of life" and teaches her "the central truth of existence." Though Nettie's life is lived "on the grim edge of poverty," it has "the frail audacious permanence of a bird's nest on the edge of a cliff - a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together
that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss. But the metaphorical language in which the scene is described and the psychic relationship between Lily and the baby suggest a literal solution to Lily's problems. The "folding and unfolding of fingers" suggests, as Richard Poirier notes, "organic unity and kinship." 19 As Lily dies she dreams of holding Nettie's child and this dream saves her from another pang of loneliness. Under the illusion caused by the drugs she feels the baby lying with her: "a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure. She settled herself into an easier position, hollowing her arm to pillow the round downy head, and holding her breath lest a sound should disturb the sleeping child." 20 Lily thus enjoys, though in her drugged illusion, an instinctive compassion and an organic unity with child. In a deeper sense she enters, in her imaginative illusion, into the republic of the spirit. She enjoys it only for a moment and it helps only to ruin her not to save her.

Lily's relationship with Lawrence Selden provides the central clue to Lily's failure. It is the key-note of the whole work and it strikes the reader's mind from the very beginning of the story. Her love for Selden can be emotionally consummated only far above the horizon of the world in which she moves. Selden also moves in the same social condition but he has a native refinement which withstands its tarnishing and shallowing influences. Both Lily and Selden despise that world in their heart though it has affected their lives. Lily's
love for Selden acts as a subconscious restriction and prevents her from marrying Rosedale without the bond of true love. They become aware of the extent of their love for each other only when the tragedy almost inevitably approaches its climax.

Selden serves as the object of Lily's love but the ideas he expresses and the possibility he represents are beyond Lily's reach. His function in the novel is to suggest the impossibility rather than the hope of love and true compassion. Though he loves Lily he is weak enough to marry her. He thinks the worst of Lily and in the most critical moments, when Lily is most in need of his love and support, he keeps away from her. It is only in the last scene that he goes to Lily's apartment to declare his love for her. But he is too late and returns after dropping passionate kisses on Lily's dead body. Instead of sympathising with Lily, he grotesquely forgives himself for his part in her final fate and concludes that he too has been a victim of circumstances. Nettie was fortunate enough to be saved by the faith of a man, but Lily did not have Nettie's good fortune in choosing the right man. Lily forgives Selden but the readers as well as the author do not. 21

Wharton has easily stated a positive alternative to the destructive society in *The French Ways and Their Meaning*. But when she tries to give it an adequate fictional life she miserably fails. Though the destructive role of society gets an upper hand in *The House of Mirth*, side by side she tries
to define and to give a positive example of a society where meaningful adult life is possible. But in her attempt she does not succeed and fails to come to a tentative conclusion.

In formulating her theory on morality Wharton is more or less influenced by Hamilton, Coppee, Pascal and Darwin. Her theory of morality is inconsistent and in her fictional world we note sudden shifts in her conception of the usefulness and futility of moral conventions. Since human beings are unable to know the absolute truth they cannot formulate specific theories concerning his nature. Thus social custom has a double role in shaping one's own life; it is a permanent value for the masses and a shifting value for the intelligent few who can understand the nature and limitations of it. After analysing the destructive role of society Wharton comes to the conclusion that customs and manners are the only guide to live one's life meaningfully. Moreover, the moral truth is not absolute and its value is changing according to the situation. The moral truth of any situation, thus, depends upon the nature of the particular individual in the particular society in which he lives. In an individual's struggle with the social convention three elements are to be taken into consideration. They are the social aspirations of the particular individual, the nature and limitation of the society and the resulting action. If the society is not vulnerable to the aspirations of the individual, the resulting action will end only in destruction.
Wharton repeatedly suggests that such a revolt is not desirable. Lily’s revolt ends in her destruction because she goes against the accepted norms of the society. As Merlyn Lyde Jones has rightly observed in *The House of Mirth*
"Lily Bart represents the individual, Bertie Dorset more than anyone else stands for the society and Selden may be thought of as representing the principle of balance". Lily Bart is an exceptional individual who goes against the decorum of her society, but the conventions she tries to break are too hard for her. Under the prevailing circumstance, it would have been better for her, had she submitted her intuitive feelings to the preservation of the social conventions in which she was imprisoned.

At least towards the fag end of her career Wharton seems to have endorsed Darwin’s view that the value of morality is utilitarian rather than intrinsic. The criterion of morality is transferred from the eternal law to the welfare of the community. But Wharton always wanted to bridge the gap between the eternal moral sense derived from one’s own inner conscience and the practical good sense derived from one’s animal social instincts. Such an attempt to bridge the opposites often results in the equivocal attitude towards morality. Furthermore she highly valued continuity and saw life as a necessary inter-relationship and at the same time as an inevitable conflict between the individual and the social order.

Social convention is the sum total of all good practices
that had existed earlier and its preservation is inevitable for the general benefit of the society. Social advancement is possible only through useful modifications of what has been existing before. This is precisely Wharton's concept of morality. Trying to improve social conventions and morality by wiping out the past and starting afresh will be as impossible as a human being trying to evolve directly from the first hit of protoplasm.

Then, how can an exceptional individual achieve self-fulfilment in a social order which does not provide sufficient opportunities. Wharton's answer to the problem is tentatively suggested in *The House of Mirth* and is further developed in *The Age of Innocence*.

The welfare of the society is the only useful standard of value and it has to be measured by economic power and material prosperity. There is nothing like absolute moral value but only the social mores which are rules of conduct of a particular set of people in a particular point in time. The purpose of these social mores is to secure general welfare of the community and it is inexorably changing with the changing social conditions. For an individual what the mores represent is the struggle to live as well as possible under the existing circumstances. The more thoroughly and individual conforms to them the more easily he gets material benefits and the more surely he serves the general interest of the community.

Lily Bart's problem is that she is not wholly content.
with what the mores prescribed. Not only does she try to
go against the social norms but she even questions their
intrinsic value. This non-conformity with the immediate
surroundings makes her a rebel and her perception of the
individual morality other than the social morality leads her
only to social destruction. Through Lily’s story Wharton suggests
that "the individual’s only profitable function is to conform
to the mores which his society has established and which alone
have educated him; there are no absolute values by which
the prevailing mores are to be judged and non-conformity and
failure may testify, even in a character so far from flawless
as Lily’s to the durability of these values."24

The Age of Innocence probes this theme more deeply.
The novel is written after Wharton’s war experience but the
milieu is the same. In this novel Wharton seems to accept
the utility of social mores which she depicted as devastating
in The House of Mirth. In both the novels Wharton shows that
the price of morality and social conformity is high, but the
individual has to adjust his temper with the changing social
norms. The disintegration of the spiritual aspiration of
the individual is painful but the disintegration of the social
order is worse than that of the spirit.

Order and continuity are the basic aspects in Mrs. Wharton’s
aesthetic and cultural ideals. She arrives at this conclusion
through dramatizing the conflict between the individual self-
fulfilment and social reality and individual’s responsibility
to it. Responsibility to society is a real obligation for the
individual, even if the society itself rests on false appearances.
This discrepancy between what is and what is professed to be, puts the individual in a moral dilemma and his actions waver from individual rebellion to social conformity. Individuals will have to sacrifice their emotions and aspirations for the general good of the community. Newland Archer's argument when he tries to dissuade Ellen from moving for a divorce rests on this principle. "The individual in such cases is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest; people cling to any convention that keeps the family together - protects the children if there are any." It is his principle of renunciation that gives meaning to life. Individual rebellion against the accepted mores will not lead anywhere other than to the realm of doom. Wharton expresses this idea in The House of the Seven Gables.

What I meant was that when you've lived a little longer you'll see what complex blunderers we all are - how we're struck blind sometimes and mad sometimes - and then, when our sight and our senses come back, how we have to set to work, and build up, little by little, bit by bit, the precious things we'd smashed to atoms without knowing it. Life is just a perpetual piecing together of broken bits. Life is just a perpetual piecing together of broken bits.

Individual's life will be broken into pieces in their struggle against conventions but still life consists in 'piecing together these broken bits.' Lily Bart's problem was that she could not glue together her broken sense of individual morality which she found at heavy odds with the social morality. She is not ready to accept the social conventions as it existed because it limits her individual aspirations. At the same time she is unwilling to break its taboo to pursue her highly individual insistence. She does not understand the value of sacrifice that
Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer are too happy to make for the sake of integrity and social life. Ellen renounces Newland and forces him to marry May because she knew that she can keep Archer's integrity only by renouncing him.

In writing *The Age of Innocence* Wharton did not retreat into an ivory tower of the past culture and she was not "evoking a lost way of life," as some critics maintain. By the time she wrote this novel the old New York had disappeared and she was imaginatively reconstructing her teen-age America because, for her it represented a coherent attitude towards life. Though she criticizes the unworldliness of her aristocrats she nostalgically cherishes it because it has exemplified certain human values by which social life is ordered. Formerly, in *The House of Mirth*, in *The Fruit of the Tree* and in *The Reef*, she had exposed this era for its frivolity and triviality but in *The Age of Innocence* she appreciates it for its stability.

The novel is neither a celebration of the good old days nor a condemnation of those days. It is a "determined effort", as Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out, "to discover a basis for human growth and continuity." The present day generation of readers may not appreciate the full significance of Ellen's and Archer's mutual renunciation of each other.

In the opening chapter of the novel the picture we get of Archer is that of an objective onlooker, one who
watches the great show of life but who does not participate in it. "He was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization. He is not a rebel not even a social conformist. His emotional life is noted for an empty adherence to convention. Never does he intellectually examine the validity of the rules by which his society lives, but cherishes the empty notion of individual duty. The main drawback in his attitude towards society is that he has no self-consciousness in his virtue. It is his sense of duty and family obligations that force him to dissuade Ellen from divorce.

Since Archer totally adheres to the empty notions of New York's social mores his vision is limited within the communal intelligence. New York's social mores concentrate on the foreground of experience and it is alive to a set manners the breaking of which was considered to be a taboo. The system is self-sufficient in itself but its weakness becomes apparent when the New Yorkers confront new ways of behaviour and new modes of experience Archer's meeting with Ellen on the symbolic level suggests the rigid New York convention's confrontation with another life style entirely different from it. Hitherto Archer has been living in a world constituted by his friends and relatives and he was not aware of a world outside his family circle. When he meets Ellen in her apartment he is astonished by her free spirit and imaginative experience. At the same time, duty bound as
he is, he is not ready to acknowledge her right to get a
divorce from a cruel and unfaithful husband.

Archer's meeting with Ellen results in an emotional
dilemma. Unconsciously he has confronted a way of life
hitherto unknown to him. He sees Ellen as a 'case' worthy
of rescue but the limitations of his social conventions
prohibit him from doing so. His emotional tie with Ellen
leads him to an experience which is incongruous with his
social conventions. He is left with two choices; either
he must disregard what his system does not approve or he
must discard the system itself as it is irrelevant to his
new born experience.

A part of the drama in *The Age of Innocence* emerges
from Archer's inability to decide either way. He is not
ready to subside the passion that Ellen has evoked in him,
and, at the same time, he is unwilling to part with his
social mores which hinder him pursuing the first. As
Wolff observes:

> Throughout much of the novel Archer longs
> for a life that moves well beyond the
> chartered realms of the familiar, a life
> of high emotional intensity and sustained
> moral and intellectual complexity. . . .
> But every real life involves compromises
> and relinquished hopes - even though some
> lives require more in the way of sacrifice
> than others. The problem that Newland
> Archer faces without fully understanding
> it is that his desire to create an ideal
> self substantially hinders him from infusing
> some genuinely possible self with meaning.
> To be specific, if the passion that Ellen
> finally released in him is virtually thwarted
> by his failings to achieve a relationship
with her, then he might not manage to attach these emotions to any part of the life he actually leads.  

Archer's love for Ellen cannot be materialized under the existing conditions and he has to sacrifice the better spirits in him in order to live in an organized society. His earnest desire to lead a life "beyond the chartered realms of the familiar" fails because his society considers it as a break with its conventions. His passion for Ellen is such that he, for a moment, unrealistically rejects his society itself. "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."  

Archer is not serious in his exclamation to enter into the republic of the spirit and to live there untroubled and uncared for. But Ellen's approach is more practical and she knows the inexorable toll that tradition extracts from individual: "She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. 'Oh, my dear - where is that country? Have you ever been there?'"  

Such a country is non-existent and every attempt to create such a one will end in the creator's destruction.  

The reality that surrounds Archer's life does not allow him to lead an emotionally independent life. "In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought" and this reality of ignoring one's genuine emotion falls back upon Archer.
May's timely declaration of her pregnancy compels Archer to go back to her with urgent immediacy. The decision to marry her more earnestly results from Archer's firm commitment to the conventions to which he belongs. By offering to marry her he tacitly acknowledges his limitations and his deep-rooted conviction that his own moral duty must be ultimately defined by his family obligations. He feels it as the reality of his life and embraces it whole-heartedly.

But his behaviour towards Ellen, after his marriage with May, tempts the reader to doubt whether he has genuinely chosen to cast his life in terms of old New York morality.

The last chapter, which is a sort of epilogue starts with the affirmation of the values that Archer has chosen as his realities. Thirty years have passed after the main action of the story and Archer's son is now Twenty-five years old. The emotion that Ellen evoked in him have changed into affectionate family life and beyond family into community welfare. His life has not been a great life, but it was a productive life, though limited in its experience. He contemplates on his past life with pride and satisfaction:

It was little enough to look back on; but when he remembered to what the young men of his generation and his set had looked to ward—the narrow groove of money-making, sport and society to which their vision had been limited—even his smallest contribution to the new state of things seemed to count, as each brick counts in a well built wall. He had done little in public life, he would always be by nature a contemplative and dilettante; but he had high things to contemplate, great things to delight in, and one great man's friendship to be his strength and pride.
Archer, now, is not the man he had dreamed of becoming after his meeting with Ellen but he is the man who is at peace with himself and with his environment.

Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life. But he thought of it now as a thing so unattainable and improbable that to have ripened would have been like desiring because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery.

When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture. She had become the composite vision of all that he had missed.34

It was not possible for Archer to get everything. But compared to his loss and gain, for having chosen the old New York social code, his gain is far more worthwhile than had he chosen the other way. He has the satisfaction that he has got what was attainable for a young man of his class in that particular time. "Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways."35

Now New York has changed. One cannot be sure whether the change is for better or worse. However, as Newland Archer feels, the change has been slow and continual and it has resulted directly out of the old traditions. Archer sees an inseparable connection between the past and the present. There was "good in the old ways" and at the same time "there was good in the new order too.36

Newland Archer’s son, Dallas, is incapable of understanding
the meaning of the lost life of feeling to which Archer
committed himself. Archer, with his insensibility and
with his sense of insecurity, has obeyed the moral
imperatives of his class and has given up Ellen and his
love for her for maintaining the integrity of that class.
Dallas does not understand its value. He is too happy to
meet the sort of experience from which Archer voluntarily
retreated a generation before. Even in this changed
circumstance, Archer does not want to marry Ellen. There
are no external obstacles for the consummation of their
passion; Newland is a widower and Ellen has not re-married.
But Archer retreats from meeting Ellen and sends, instead,
his son to meet her. At last he has come to terms with his
society and with his self.

While sitting in the library, meditating over the
significant incidents of his life, Archer cherishes the
significance of his sacrifice. It was the same little
room where his wife blushingly told him the news that she
was to have a child; and where his son, Dallas, was christened.
It was the place where Archer had kissed her through her wedding
veil and where Dallas, for the first time, called him "Dad".

But above all - sometimes Archer put it above
all - it was in that library that the Governor
of New York . . . had turned to his host,
and said, banging his clenched fist on the table
and gnashing his eyeglasses: "hang the
professional politician! You're the kind of
man the country wants, Archer."
Archer is the kind of man any country wants, Wharton asserts. Archer who was a near rebel in his early youth has become a total conformist. He has perfectly adjusted with his society and has become so much a product of his race, historical moment and milieu.

Through the characterization of Archer, Wharton has shown the individual's useful function in society. Individual has to commit himself to the cultural traditions which shape his mind and heart. This attitude is especially true after her world war experience. Though emotionally biased to the exceptional women's rebellious spirit, Wharton painfully comes to the recognition that an accepted standard of moral conduct is a necessary element to live in an ordered and established civilization. Although her sympathy goes out to many of her women characters who seek release from intolerable marriages, she always makes them pay a heavy price for their freedom. Sometimes she distinctly implies that it is better for them that there should be such punishment for transgressing the accepted values.

On the other hand characters have to pay a high price for adjusting themselves to the environment. Newland Archer, the perfect social conformist in Wharton's eyes, has to give up Ellen Olenska and an emotionally sustainatle life. Charlotte Lovell (The Old Maid) has to give up her child, Ethan Frome reaps misery and Justine Brent suffers estrangement from her
husband. Because of the characters incapacity to fracture the convention Charity is forced to marry Royal whom she does not love. The Duke in *The Valley of Decision* loses Fulvia and has to live in exile for the rest of his life. Lizzie Haraldean ("Autres Temps") dies in loneliness and George Darrow is forced to give-up both Sophie Viner and Anna Leath. All these characters fail to break the cages of their society though they struggle to the best of their ability. The basic problem with them is that they are not social conformists either. They have difficulty in choosing their course of life; if they follow the society's prescribed norms they have to sacrifice their emotional life; if they go against it, their social life will be a veritable social inferno.

Wharton's final comment on the relation between individual and society, if one can get one from her fiction, seems to be that of mutual compromise. Justine Brent, in her sorrow voices this:

> Life was not a matter of principles but a succession of pitiful compromises with fate, concessions to old traditions, old beliefs, old charities and frailties. That was what her act had taught her - that was the word of the gods to the mortal who had laid a hand on their bolts.

In their struggle with society individuals have to compromise and have to concede certain things. By way of adjustment what they can do is to evolve a set of personal moral code that is not entirely at loggerheads with the social morality and commit to it in moments of crises. This
is precisely what Newland Archer achieves in the end. Kate Clephane (Mother's Reconciliation) also arrives at this psychological poise when she repudiates her husband and child. What she gets back is her own lost sense of identity and the restitution of her personality which offers an existence far beyond the limitations of her relation with the husband and child. In this sense Wharton is "a woman of the second-half of the twentieth century."^{38}
CHAPTER V

LITERARY THEORY AND PRACTICE