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Interpreting Unhappy Women in Edith Wharton's Novels

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INTERPRETING UNHAPPY WOMEN IN EDITH WHARTON’S NOVELS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ...............................................................................................................................iv

INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................1

1. NO DEFEAT: “SUPERHUMAN” MAY WELLAND IN THE AGE OF INNOCENCE ..............................................................17

2. NO EXIT: SOUL-SEEKING LILY BART IN THE HOUSE OF MIRTH ..............40

3. NO LIMIT: ENERGETIC UNDINE SPRAGG IN THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY.................................................................71

4. NO PAIN: SOULLESS PAULINE MANFORD IN THE TWILIGHT SLEEP ......100

5. NO FEAR: COURAGEOUS ELLEN OLENSKA IN THE AGE OF INNOCENCE .................................................................124

CONCLUSION .....................................................................................................................154

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................................................161

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ................................................................................................173
ABSTRACT

There is nothing new under the sun in human experiences of inevitable disappointment, suffering, and pain derived from imperfect human nature and the reality of human life. This dissertation analyzes female characters that suffer from sorrow, pain, and tribulation in these novels by Edith Wharton: The Age of Innocence (1920), The House of Mirth (1905), The Custom of the Country (1913) and Twilight Sleep (1927). Female characters that I discuss belong to a group of upper-class in New York, ranged from post-Civil War era to post-World War I. I focus on how they cope with complications and endure unhappiness resulting from their limited positions in society and the inadequacy of their marriages. This dissertation aims to explore the social, cultural, and psychological conditions that lead Wharton’s female characters toward a new consciousness and to examine how human psychology develops based on the principles of the analytical psychology of Carl Jung and his followers rather than the approach we associate with Sigmund Freud. As feminist scholars have pointed out, Freud’s theory does not hold for girls because boys’ and girls’ Oedipal complexes are not symmetrical. A girl does not simply transfer her affection from mother to father and give up her tender feelings for her mother. Instead, the bond is more likely to be sustained, and the relation to her father is added to it. Girls often come to define themselves more in relation to others, rather than as separate and isolated. The impact of feminist scholarship since the 1970s has restored Wharton’s works to the American canon. Having shifted from the external factors to the psychological domain, Wharton’s unhappy female characters represent the oppression of what Jung identifies as the Feminine, not of women. The problem lies in the lack of relationship between a woman’s ego and her archetypes—both Feminine and Masculine. This study demonstrates how the character’s life is shaped by the suppression and distortion, and later, the implosive and explosive power of her evolving Feminine consciousness. Wharton’s characters embody her philosophy that paradox is the essence of living, particularly the paradox in the human psyche. Although one longs for harmony, peace and resolution, experiences teach one that it is conflict and failure that stimulate one’s growth and evolution to another stage in life.
INTRODUCTION

The Feminine in Distress: Edith Wharton’s Women in a Liminal Position

Remember the ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors…. Regard us then as beings placed by providence under your protection and in immitation of the supreme being make use of that power only for our happiness.
--Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776

This dissertation analyzes Edith Wharton’s novels set in New York society as it was undergoing changes during the transitional period from the post-Civil War to the post-World War I era. Wharton’s novels center on authentically human women characters who seek their happiness through marriage and family. However, in spite of each character’s strenuous struggle, none of the characters attain the happiness they pursue. Instead of happiness, women characters in Wharton’s novels have to cope with complications and endure unhappiness resulting from the inadequacy of their respective marriages and from their limited positions in society. This dissertation aims to explore the social, cultural, and psychological conditions that lead Wharton’s female characters toward a new consciousness and to examine how human psychology develops based on the principles of the analytical psychology of Carl Jung and his followers.

Happiness has been major concern in American literature dating as far back as “The Declaration of Independence.” Thomas Jefferson manifested “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as inalienable rights. Jefferson argued that in order to gain “inalienable rights,” colonists needed to separate from their parent country and to rebel against the tyrannical authority of the British crown.¹ The Enlightenment ideal influenced the political system and promoted the idea of an autonomous individualism. During the age of Enlightenment, philosophers abandoned the doctrine of creation and substituted a state of nature. In this primeval state, individuals are the only ultimate reality; social bonds are created by the choices individuals make. French philosopher Pierre Manent sums up the basic principle of modern liberalism: “No individual can have an obligation to which he has not consented” (35).

Jefferson wanted America to replace patriarchal hierarchy with a true consent that is according to John Milton “a love fitly dispos’d to mutual help and comfort of life” (qtd. in Armstrong and Tennenhouse 168). Locke in the Two Treatises of
Government had introduced the idea that “reason” provides the basis of individual rights and the source of political power. A child acquires the right of self-government when he acquires rationality through education. Locke, however, emphasized that rationality came only to men. On the other hand, women are subjected to the authority of their fathers and husbands. Locke first conceived a household modeled on the state, a miniature kingdom. In The Imaginary Puritan, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse develop the idea from Locke, pointing out that “only in America could private property provide the basis for an individuated kingdom where each individual reigned supreme” (24). In this sense, Armstrong and Tennenhouse think that conceiving a nuclear family as the new family unit is a landmark in the emergence of modernity in the Anglo-American world.

Interestingly, Armstrong and Tennenhouse recognize the birth of fiction as a genre in the transitional age of modernity and comment on its role: “The novel transforms the old nature animated by God into what might be called a discourse of personal life, the world as felt and reflected upon by the individuated subject” (187). Armstrong and Tennenhouse indicate how suitable fiction proved for representing the inner world of the solitary individual that biologically belonged to a family. In other words, fiction written in the eighteenth century was nothing but an articulation of social relationships in terms of an “urge to form a modern family unit” (156).

For example, seduction fiction in the late eighteenth-century in America follows the plotline that a young heroine who lives in her feelings falls victim to temptation and never recovers. This fiction admonishes readers that they subordinate the liberal notion of individual values such as promise of equality and freedom and rights to the need of community. Where each individual gives up all private interest, there will be an achievement of the general good because an individual belongs to the community. Seduction fiction subordinates democratic politics to a politics of affinity, which will reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable division between individual rights and the needs of community.

Nina Baym in Woman’s Fiction observes that “the cult of domesticity” dominates woman’s fiction written between 1820 and 1870. Baym explains “the cult of domesticity” in terms of “fulfillment for women in marriage and motherhood” (26). The nineteenth-century woman’s fiction idealizes a happy home as “the acme of human
“bliss” apart from “the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society” (27). It also assumes that the greatest happiness for both men and women comes from domestic relations, “the whole network of human attachments based on love, support, and mutual responsibility” (27). Thereby women authors created heroines who eventually learn to strike a balance between total submission and inner independence. As a result, whatever the circumstances, heroines in woman’s fiction bring a new kind of family life, organized around love rather than money.\(^2\)

Baym finds the message embodied in woman’s fiction that “to the extent that woman dominated the home, the ideology implied an unprecedented historical expansion of her influence, and a tremendous advance over her lot in a world dominated by money and market considerations, where she was defined as chattel or sexual toy” (27).

The domestic ideology connects to the nineteenth-century view of the American “true woman.” According to Barbara Welter, a “true woman” is someone who is destined “to bring comfort and beauty into man’s life and to combat his more sensual nature and the materialism of business” (57). Welter also mentions that any good woman should cultivate four virtues for the ideal of womanhood: “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (21). Women’s role is to sustain the “domestic ideal” by making home be a place for all the purity, morality, and love that is absent in the outside world. Baym, however, notes the changing condition of women later:

The Civil War had demonstrated the feebleness of the affectional model of human relationships, and the Gilded Age affirmed profit as the motive around which all of American life was to be organized. Home now became a retreat, a restraint and a constraint, as it had not appeared to be earlier; to define it as woman’s sphere was now unambiguously to invite her to absent herself permanently from the world’s affairs. (50)

Baym concludes her book telling that women authors’ optimistic view that home could provide a stronghold against a commercial, greedy society seems naïve now (299). Nevertheless, Baym emphasizes that nineteenth-century woman’s fiction plays a crucial role in shaping characters and society.

During that time period, America was entering into the era of urbanization, industrialization, Darwinian theory, advances in the sciences, the development of pragmatism, the rise of sociology and psychology, and an awareness of social and
economic inequities. The novel The Gilded Age (1873) that Mark Twain co-authored with Charles Dudley Warner illustrates the outwardly showy, and inwardly corrupt nature of American society during the industrialization of the late 1800's. Alan Trachtenberg in The Incorporation of America characterizes the Gilded Age with such traits as “the new immigrant work force, the doom of the countryside and rise of the great city, the mechanization of daily life, the invasion of the marketplace into human relations, the corruption and scandal of a political universe dominated by great wealth” (143-44). Trachtenberg also notes that anxiety in the face of upheaval and transition prevailed in these years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not even the most sheltered woman could be detached from the real world of men because woman’s role, her reality, was in close relation to a man.

Wharton’s female characters also belong to the upper class in New York that Thorstein Veblen describes as the leisure-class, a group that has the luxury of consuming time. In The Theory of the Leisure Class, Veblen points out that the “non-productivity” of the leisure class satisfies two purposes: “a sense of unworthiness of productive work, and […] evidence of pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness” (264). These upper-class people preferred not to expose themselves to the world of work or the workers, whom May Welland in The Age of Innocence (1920) calls “common” (999).

Wharton, born Edith Newbold Jones in 1862, grew up in the aftermath of the greatest social upheaval America has ever known, the Civil War, observing the emergence of the new class of the nouveau riche. Since the Civil War, New York had attracted merchants, bankers, real estate speculators, and industrialists. Their influx made New York the economic and cultural center of the nation. Between the Civil War and the end of the nineteenth century, a group of enriched “invaders” threatened and finally overran the “aboriginal” culture of Old New York and its leisure-class values. The only purpose for their existence appeared to be acquiring material wealth. At first, the invaders tried to imitate the behavior and appearances of the aborigines, having had little time to develop manners equivalent to their wealth. Later, they disregarded what they could not understand, obscuring the quiet restraint of the older families. Wharton expresses her opinion on the change of social conditions: “A potent combination of urbanized labor and robber-baron industry had dealt ‘a double blow’ to the American
patriciate” (Herman 166). Furthermore, Christopher Lasch in Heaven in a Heartless World says that this change brought New York society to “the crisis of marriage and the family” by the end of the nineteenth century (8).

A leisured class, which comprises Wharton’s parents, their friends, and relatives, values what she refers to in her most well known memoir as “education and good manners, and scrupulous probity in business and private affairs” (A Backward Glance 21). Accordingly, their marriages are not to create a new society, but to preserve the status quo. Veblen, however, indicates the change of marriage customs among the newly rich people. He notes that a successful man could have no better social ornament than a wife who does nothing of any economic or social consequence. Veblen explains that the wife’s delicacy, her culture, and her childlike ignorance of the male world give a husband the class that money alone cannot buy. Women lived in the shadow of men, but their main role had changed from cultivating “true womanhood” to developing a persona that would be useful in promoting her husband’s ambition. It first appears that there is no harm in a man’s desire to have an idle and therefore ideal wife. However, these assumptions perpetuate the earlier idea of a “marriage market” which determines a woman’s value. Women’s value is not intrinsic but an effect of social relations determined by a market economy designed for and by men. It is inevitable for women to be exposed to the loneliness and alienation inseparable from a market economy.

In the same vein, Emily Hancock in “The Girl Within: Touchstone for Women’s Identity” indicates the oppressive force in culture that does not allow a woman the freedom to realize her full potential based on her identity:

They [women] described the cultural press that negated their feminine identities in youth, and they conveyed their shock when they discovered, long after making adult commitments that tied them to the destinies of others, that the identities they had assumed since girlhood were bolted to a man-made foundation that was not of their own making. (60-61; emphasis added)

It seems that marriage is a “vocation” for women in New York society, as Lawrence Selden in The House of Mirth calls it (9). Lily assures Selden, however, that marriage is the vocation society imposes on her rather than her choice. She finds that marketing herself by enhancing her beauty, which is her only asset, involves being seductive and
attractive, but it has nothing to do with her feelings and the sense of her own intrinsic value.

Nevertheless, the female characters in Wharton’s novels are not exceptions in pursuing their happiness through marriage and family, even though the concept of a happy marriage is different for each character. May Welland in *The Age of Innocence* believes marriage to be a union requiring both a spiritual and a physical love and expects her marriage to bring her joy and happiness. Like other women in society, May thinks of the family as the basis of society and the means by which they uphold and transmit traditions. On the other hand, Ellen Olenska in the same novel is experienced and Europeanized since her mother married an Italian, and she grew up mainly in Europe under the guardianship of her aunt. Ellen marries Olenski, a Polish count, making the so-called “Cinderella-type choice,” and expects to live happily ever after (Wagner-Martin *The Age of Innocence: A Novel of Ironic Nostalgia* 65).

Marriage is also the vehicle of happiness for Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* (1905). To Lily, marriage is a means to secure not only social power but also all the material comforts, placing her above the mundane task of earning her own money. She cries out to her friend Gerty Farish: “I want admiration, I want excitement, I want money—yes, money!” (175). In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton portrays upper-class New York society at the turn of the twentieth century, while she represents Victorian America in the 1870s in *The Age of Innocence*. The reader of these novels notes that even though the notion of marriage for women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has changed, marriage was still the central fact of a woman’s life.

Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* (1913) is a character who takes marriage as a career. To Undine, marriage is the vehicle for upward social mobility. As an American “businesswoman,” Undine pressures, bullies and negotiates her way into New York society by marrying, divorcing and remarrying wealthy, powerful men. Undine regards marriage and divorce as business contracts rather than as a union requiring both spiritual and physical love. When Undine says “I want what the others want” (512), we can get a glimpse into her notion of happiness. In *Twilight Sleep* (1924), Pauline Manford believes that the pursuit of the perfect system or creed will bring her happiness. She has become a master of domestic details through making every effort to run her house and her family perfectly. To Pauline, all lives are
perfectible and everyone should be always happy: “Of course there ought to be no Pain… nothing but Beauty” (14).

Each of them expects her marriage to be perfect and happy, but it does not turn out that way. Some of the characters such as Undine and Pauline would not admit their failing marriages, but it is evident from readers’ viewpoint. Many scholars have attempted to provide the answer to what causes the obstacle between Wharton’s female characters and happiness. The oppression and devaluation of their gender under patriarchy is the answer that scholars consensually have reached. Margaret McDowell indicates in “Viewing The Custom of the Country: Edith Wharton’s Feminist,” that the predicament of women in a male-dominated society is what Wharton projects in her novels (520).

On the other hand, there was still an effort among women to liberate themselves from male domination and to manage their own lives, pursuing happiness and self-realization. At the turn of the twentieth century, a group of young women appeared who rejected their mothers' ways of life and began to express autonomy and individuality. The "New Woman" had first emerged in the late nineteenth century, challenging conventional gender roles constrained by Victorian norms and domesticity. The New Woman had greater freedom to pursue public roles and even to display her sexuality. But the New Woman movement offended men and women who objected to women's public presence and associated this movement with a decline in morality.  

In The Grounding of Modern Feminism, Nancy Cott marks 1910 as the year when the word feminism first appeared on the American scene to indicate the cause of equal rights and suffrage for women. As Cott mentions, women were less defined “by virtue of attachments to home, family, and childrearing” and increasingly entered the “terrain culturally understood as male“ (6, 7). That is, women tried to prove that they were as capable and worthy as men in the eyes of society and in their own eyes. However, when the New Woman turned away from a seemingly useless past to navigate unfamiliar territory, there was neither a map from her forebears nor the counsel of elders to guide her. While a man could follow in his father’s footsteps to exercise male prerogatives, a woman could hardly count on her mother’s ways to carry her through. The separation from the mother also meant a rejection of traditional marriage and dependency on men for economic and social security. Therefore, her only option
seemed to be embracing the model of economic independence through an unconscious identification with the masculine style of being in order to counterbalance the personal, subjective, and dependent existence of their mothers that had been burdened with sorrow and suffering.

Wharton, however, does not sympathize with these independent-minded women. In 1928, a friend sent Wharton a copy of Ray Strachey’s *The Cause*, a feminist work about women’s social role and status. Wharton thanked her correspondent but replied that she observed, “women were made for pleasure and procreation” (qtd. in Lewis 486). Wharton may have realized that adopting the masculine style of being as a persona for the sake of social approval did not give a woman an ultimate solution to her plight. Instead, Wharton turns her attention to the inner complexities of women’s lives derived from their subservient position as objects of desire for men and from their emotional distress and physical pain. Furthermore, through her character’s lives, Wharton seems to convey the unfamiliar truth that there is some value for human beings in not getting what they want.

It seems that Wharton creates characters in order to undermine the common assumption that they would be happier with the freedom of choice. In *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) and in her essay “Permanent Values in Fiction” (1934), Wharton states that her purpose as a writer was to illuminate and define the quality of life by focusing on characters rather than on mere situations. She argues that the creation of “vivid and memorable characters” is the most important hallmark of accomplished fiction since characters contribute to the reader’s understanding of “the general law of human experience” (qtd. in Olin-Ammentorp 158). In *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), Wharton observes through Justine Brent that life is “not a matter of abstract principles, but a succession of pitiful compromises with fate, of concessions to old tradition, old beliefs, old charities and frailties” (624). She invents character after character that must face the dilemma of either escaping an unhappy situation by unethical means or else remaining entrapped to avoid causing unhappiness for others. In order to examine relationships between people and their environments, Wharton entangles characters with the customs, manners and culture of various social groups. Although her characters are imperfect, subject to misfortune and humiliation, she does not belittle their suffering and struggles but seeks to find meanings and justifications in their pursuits.
Wharton herself also endured an unhappy marriage for twenty-eight years before she decided to sue her husband for divorce according to two of biographers, R. W. B. Lewis and Cynthia Wolff. At twenty-three, she had married Edward Wharton, a man thirteen years her senior and even further from her in interests than in years. He preferred sports and an outdoor life to literature and good conversation. In addition to their incompatibility, Edward Wharton after twenty-five years of marriage began to show signs of mental failure. Edith endured several years of his unpredictable and irrational behavior. Her decision to divorce her husband must have caused her severe doubt and agony. As her marriage disintegrated, Wharton wrote to John Hugh-Smith in 1909:

I wonder, among all the tangles of this mortal coil which one contains tighter knots to undo, and consequently suggests more tugging, and pain, and diversified elements of misery, than the marriage tie—and which, consequently, is more 'made to the hand' of the psychologist and the dramatist? (qtd. in Wolff 221)

Wharton’s letter tells us the personal pain that her marriage caused, her pain that she could not easily express or share with someone else. Wharton divorced Teddy and lived permanently in Europe, where she could enjoy the literary conversations to which her husband had never been equal. She broke family and national ties to spend the remaining twenty-four years of her life in France, surrounded by friends yet always independent. Wharton became a writer through exile and felt compelled to recreate the broken world that had once had the power to devastate her. Eventually, her distanced view of American culture in France gave her a more objective perspective: “Indeed, it is only by having seen other countries, studied their customs, read their books, gotten to know their inhabitants, that one can place one’s own country in the history of civilization” (qtd. in Tintner 27).

In regard to women’s plights in marriages, Wharton offers a perspective on American marriage through Charles Bowen, who is a sociologist in The Custom of the Country. Bowen tells that happiness and lasting romance in matrimony for American women is not possible because a husband does not love his wife: “The emotional centre of gravity’s not the same in the two hemispheres. In the effete societies it’s love, in our new one it’s business” (150). There is no real comradeship between man and wife in
terms of the nuptial bond because “the average American man looks down on his wife,” as Bowen theorizes (150). In marriage, the man is to provide all monetary, material goods for his wife and their children. Such a task takes him away from the home, out into the world of business, a corrupt, competitive world of deals, persuasions, coercions and double-deals: “In America the crime passionnel is a ‘big steal’—there’s more excitement in wrecking railways than homes” (150). Love for a woman or desire for a balanced marital union has no value to the businessman who devotes himself to an affair with money.

Interestingly, Bowen’s comment on American marriage reminds us of the correspondences between Abigail Adams, First Lady of the United States from 1797 to 1801, and her husband, John Adams, who was away from home to work with the Continental Congress in 1776. In the “Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776,” Abigail asks her husband for a favor to remember wives when he and other Founding Fathers work on framing the new government and various documents necessary to establish the new nation:

Remember the ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands…. Regard us then as beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the supreme being make use of that power only for our happiness. (443)

However, John Adams’s response to his wife’s request to protect women and to be concerned with their happiness is not what Abigail might have expected. In the “Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776,” he writes:

I begin to think the Ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicks, Scotch Renegadoes, at last they have stimulated the [ladies] to demand new privileges and threaten to rebell. (444)

We note that John Adams puts women in the category of rebellious groups to be oppressed. It seems that he thinks of the feminine attributes in women as undesirable. Relevantly, Manisha Roy points out that the feminine attributes such as “intuition, feeling, subjectivity, relatedness, emotional reactions, endurance” have been devalued
Riane Eisler also says that the feminine virtues of “compassion, nonviolence, and caring” are downgraded (28).

Regarding the oppression of women, Robert Stein poses the following rhetorical questions:

If not men, then who or what is responsible for the inferior economic and social status of women? And who is responsible for the prevailing attitudes that women are intellectually inferior to men, that they are irrational, guided more by emotions than reason, and therefore unstable, weak, childish, and morally inferior to men? (42)

Stein’s questions lead us to other questions of what it means to be a man and to be a woman. Stein offers a simple answer: “Men have carried the so-called Masculine qualities and women the Feminine” (41). John Adams’s reply to his wife’s letter suggests that a woman and her Feminine style of being are socially and politically inferior and therefore that marriage works as a system of domination rather than a partnership based on mutual consent. This attitude tells about the woman’s condition, which Sukie Colegrave sums up as “the absence of choice and individual freedom, the lack of opportunity for conscious creativity and love” (20). In other words, women were excluded from having “the inalienable rights.”

In “Rethinking Feminism, the Animus, and the Feminine,” Polly Young-Eisendrath, a Jungian analyst, draws attention to gender differences. She thinks of them as “cultural inscriptions on a universal condition of sexual difference” (165). Young-Eisendrath proposes to consider gender as psychologically complex, and to incorporate particular images and meanings from cultural and familial contexts. Even though we struggle against cultural images that identify womanliness with the Feminine and manliness with the Masculine, it is almost impossible to separate natural behavior from cultural conditioning. Eisler also indicates that it is never easy for us to extricate the essential in gender from “sexual stereotypes [that] have been our cultural staples, the stuff out of which we have constructed how we think and feel, even what we dream” (35). Nevertheless, we must distinguish between the negative aspects that are natural to life and to the Feminine, and those imposed by a culture that has oppressed the Feminine for generations.
Jungian psychology examines cultural patterns that have their origins in archetypal or instinctual roots. Jung introduces the ancient concept of the archetype to modern psychology: “The fact of this inheritance explains the truly amazing phenomenon that certain motifs from myths and legends repeat themselves the world over in identical forms…. I have called these images or motifs ‘archetypes’” (Jung 1972a, 65). Jung illustrated that every archetype has two sides, positive and negative. All these figures can come up both in the analytic encounter or in myths and fairy tales. According to Eisler, as Sophia or Feminine Wisdom, the Feminine has been exalted as man’s conscience, as his symbol of wisdom. As man’s muse, the Feminine has been also described as his inspiration, his guiding light. On the other hand, as in the myths of Pandora and Eve, “darkness, weakness, evil, and deceit” have been equated with the Feminine, providing enough reason that the Feminine must be suppressed or repressed by all means (34). Based on her study of the archetypal myths, Eisler argues that the Feminine has been alternatingly “romanticized and vilified” (34).

Regarding the dualistic view of the Feminine, Stein holds to a more essential question. Stein suggests that if the archetypal Feminine and Masculine roles have emerged in order to satisfy certain basic needs, we should explore the nature of those needs and how change may affect them. Young-Eisendrath’s critical stance on Stein’s approach to gender is convincing when she says,

[i]f we talk about gender as archetypal, then we hold that its content is always the same (e.g., logos as masculine and eros as feminine), and we assume that we already know what the particular patterns of healthy functioning should be. (165)

Young-Eisendrath disagrees with the reductive essentialism concerning gender differences. Stein’s approach is still useful since it is based on the unchanging fact that whenever changes threaten basic needs, human nature will resist them.

It seems hard for a modern woman to be herself, to be fully feminine and fully productive. As for an answer, Roy tells that the problem lies in “the lack of relationship between her ego and her archetypes—both Feminine and Masculine” (140). Therefore, it is necessary for a woman to reconnect with her repressed and wounded Femininity by releasing and resolving the painful and shameful emotions. This change will enable her
to return to a more conscious Femininity so that her energy allows her to flow to
understand, relate, and love.

As Jung recognizes, the ego’s encounter with the “inferior personality” in the
unconscious initiates the psychological journey. Eric Neumann in Depth Psychology
and a New Ethic describes the role that the ego plays being at the center of the
consciousness as “the bearer and representative of the collective values current at any
given time” (36). On the other hand, the “inferior personality,” or “the shadow,” as
Jung calls it, consists of everything that will not fit in with nor adapt to the laws and
regulations of conscious life. Neumann indicates that growth towards wholeness takes
place when there is a relationship between the dark, instinctual side of human nature
and the light side represented by the conscious mind: “The acceptance of the shadow
involves a growth in depth into the ground of one’s own being, and with the loss of the
airy illusion of an ego-ideal, a new depth and rootedness and stability is born” (96).

In that sense, a founding principle of Jungian psychology stands out in that the
unconscious is superior to the capacity of the ego to comprehend it. Jung thinks that the
unconscious is so active that it leads the more limited ego to the greater forms of
consciousness through the relationship with the unconscious. When it comes to
psychological development, Jung focuses on the goal-oriented psyche. The Jungian
notion of the superiority of the unconscious is different from the Freudian belief that the
repression of infantile sexual fantasy dominates the unconscious. On the one hand,
Freud regards the unconscious as sexuality, a power from the dark side of the
unconscious, which one must sublimate; on the other hand, Jung thinks of it as “an
essential component of his creative vitality” (Neumann 147).

Jean Bolen regards the psychological task of redeeming the Feminine as a
creative process, calling it “consciousness raising” (219). A new consciousness rises
when one is initiated to liberate oneself from the psychological limitations and
institutional oppression of patriarchal assumptions. That is, the patient, uncritical
receptivity of the Feminine allows the repressed, denied, dissociated, and unconscious
parts of the soul to rise into consciousness. As a woman journeys into the new
consciousness, she suffers so that she can restore the archetypal pattern of the Feminine.
This process enables her to define herself not by the rules of the patriarchy but by her
inner sense of self, which is her uniqueness and individuality.
Wharton also acknowledges a bitter fact of woman’s life by revealing inherited
cultural and psychological assumptions of inadequacy of the female self. Having made
this shift from the external factors to the psychological domain, Wharton’s unhappy
female characters represent the oppression of the Feminine, not of women. In that
sense, Wharton’s female characters urge the reader to reconsider the concept of
happiness. A woman’s true contentment comes with the psychological growth from the
undifferentiated, unconscious Feminine principle, through the more focused, active
Masculine principle, to an awareness of more differentiated Feminine as “the
embodiment of inwardness, which stands maternally in defense of inner values and of
one’s own uncertainties resulting from the untrustworthiness of outer rule and law”
(Whitmont 265). Certainly, one purpose of this dissertation is to present other ways of
reading them.

I will analyze each character in the following chapters, drawing upon the central
concepts that Jung and Jungian analysts have established. Edith Wharton scholarship
has neglected the Jungian approach even though Jung’s essays on literature show that he
is concerned with literature as a cultural production. Discussion of the novels in the
following chapters is not in the chronological order of their publication but according to
the historical period and social class of their respective subjects. The first chapter
provides a study on the character May Welland in The Age of Innocence, who is from
the traditional class of Old New York. The next chapter focuses on the character Lily
Bart in The House of Mirth, who belongs to the generation that follows that of May.
Wharton portrays Lily in a historical transition from Old New York to new Old New
York. In the third and fourth chapters, the invaders, Undine Spragg in The Custom of
the Country and Pauline Manford in Twilight Sleep, are the subject for a discussion of
ways the influx of new money challenges family structure and values of Old New York
and affects the ways people deal with pain and distress.

The above characters avoid unpleasantness at all costs, rather than looking at the
truth of their pain. They follow the cardinal rule of New York society by shielding
themselves from everything unpleasant, which inevitably invites both deception and
self-deception under the pretext of good intentions. In the following chapter and the
concluding one, I shall bring Ellen Olenska and Nettie Struther back from The Age of
Innocence and The House of Mirth and counterbalance them with the female characters
that the previous chapters have examined. Expatriate Ellen represents Wharton’s vision of a new way of life for her fellow women. Lastly, I draw attention to Nettie, whose shattered life has been restored not only by others’ intervention but also by discovering her own inner strength and Femininity. Nettie’s journey comes full circle when she marries her childhood friend, George and has their baby that embodies joy, pleasure, and ecstasy.
NOTES

1. See Jay Fligelman’s *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* for studies on how the American Revolution was shaped by a shift in family relations from the patriarchal model of the Puritans to the antipatriarchal model of the Enlightenment; see also Darrin McMahon’s *Happiness: A History*.

2. Baym also mentions the fantasy of parental overthrow that owes as much to social and economic conditions as to inherent psychic needs. (40)

3. See also Robert Wiebe’s *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* for an especially helpful overview of American Progressive Age.

4. Hereafter, I will cite excerpts from Wharton’s texts in the text parenthetically.

5. See Elna Green’s *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question* for discussions of the conservative women’s view.

6. Susan Rowland specifically defines archetypes as “inherited principles for certain kinds of meanings. Those meanings actually generated, or images produced in dreams, will depend to a great extent on the culture and personal history of the dreamer” (5).

7. Wharton also adopts unchanging human nature for the basis of her work. For example, in *Twilight Sleep*, Pauline admits that “[h]uman nature had not changed as fast as social usage, and if Jim's wife left him nothing could prevent his suffering in the same old way” (198). Wharton makes the point through Jim’s case that suffering human nature is a major aspect of the human condition for both men and women.

8. For references that feature applications of Jungian and post-Jungian literary criticism, see Demaris Wehr’s *Jung and Feminism: Liberating Archetypes*; Susan Rowland’s *Jung: A Feminist Revision* and C. G. Jung and Literary Theory: The Challenge from Fiction; James Baumlin’s *Post-Jungian Criticism: Theory and Practice*; Elizabeth Wright’s *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal*.
May Welland, in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), embodies the innocence that Old New York idealized in a woman. In Old New York’s view, May perfectly plays her roles of a daughter, a wife, and a mother till her death. The anti-climax of the novel is that when her son Dallas reveals to his father Newland Archer that she has known her husband’s love for her cousin Ellen Olenska, Newland denies himself a visit to Ellen. Instead, he sends Dallas to Ellen with his words: “Say I’m old-fashioned: that’s enough” (1126). May continues to have power over husband even several years after her death.

In “What Edith Wharton Saw in Innocence,” Louis Coxe mentions: “I believe that if any character in this novel partakes of the heroic nature it is ended May Welland, she of the pink and white surface and the candid glance, whose capacity for passion and sacrifice her husband never knew” (159). Coxe is not the only one who pays tribute to the under-appreciated character May. Gwendolyn Morgan, in “The Unsung Heroine—A Study of May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*,” also asserts that, in spite of being a minor character in the novel, May can be the novel’s “true heroine” with her many triumphs in her fights for her home and husband (101).

On the other hand, feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Ammons and Emily Orlando attempt to illuminate the oppressed nature Wharton hides within “the innocent American girl” May. Ammons and Orlando both note the implied meaning of innocence by relating the title of the novel to Sir Joshua Reynolds’s portrait of the daughter of his favorite niece, “The Age of Innocence.” Orlando describes Reynolds’ picture as “the profile of a small girl seated barefoot in a pastoral setting with bow in hair, eyes open and unquestioning, and hands demurely crossed over her breast” (70). Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* indicates that “innocence” is the key characteristic in Henry James’s American Girls (76-77). Ammons asserts that the “child-woman” May is “America’s answer to Chinese foot-binding… perfectly embod[y]ing her class’s ideal of helpless femininity” (147). Feminist scholars conclude that the myth of the American Girl, that she is a perpetual “innocent” child, is damaging to women because it makes them victims of their husbands and the patriarchal system.
May is a victor and victim, considering critics’ contradictory views of her. This chapter seeks to provide a depth of study into May, aiming to explain the complexity of her character that results in the contradictory views.

Before Fifth Avenue became a social equivalent for industrial wealth, May was born into an elite family in Old New York. Historically, New York society--defined by the parameter of Mrs. Astor’s ballroom, the “New York Four Hundred”--was a closely-knit community (qtd. in Waid xvi). Ward McAllister in Society As I Have Found It (1890) wrote: “the old Knickerbocker families,” an established elite “represent[ed] the best society of this great commercial city” (224). This small but powerful New York clan, descended from old Dutch settlers or English merchants, clung together, intermarried, and made the rules for society in Manhattan.

A few families in this class actually traced their roots to English or Dutch aristocracies, but most belonged to the middle class, whose wealth derived from wholesale trade, shipping, and real estate investment in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Despite the absence of a true aristocracy, Old New York, a small class that passed for an aristocracy, dominated the New York of Wharton’s youth in the years after the Civil War.  

Old New York was an exclusive, and highly regulated society that stressed the communal life. People in Old New York were anti-democratic and suspicious of outsiders, especially Europeans and the nouveaux riches. Ellen Olenska ironically calls Old New York a “heaven,” a place for the “blessed,” where women do not feel any need, a place where no one cries, where the people seem like “children playing in a grave-yard” (853, 1003). The ideal woman in Old New York is the child-woman, and Newland considers a woman as a child. May is the prototype of what a young woman should be in her community. She embodies “whiteness, radiance, goodness,” being innocent to the point of naïveté, deferential to her family in all things (858). When she appears at the opera, one immediately associates pink-faced and fair-haired May with youth and virginity.

Newland is attracted to May, or, more accurately, to the feminine and social ideals he believes she embodies—“peace, stability, comradeship, and the steadying sense of an unescapable duty” (1003). He believes “his fate [is] sealed” to her (896). His mother Mrs. Archer also makes clear to him: “Dear May is my ideal” (960). Mrs.
van der Luyden reminds him that at their dinner May is the handsomest girl in the room. Ellen adds her view to him, saying: “May is a darling; I’ve seen no young girl in New York so handsome and so intelligent” (890). Newland is to marry a woman his mother would have chosen, a suitable bride for a leisure-class man, a woman who will carry out, to the letter, the social form he was trained to admire and respect. He is complacent in marrying May, one of “his own kind,” because their marriage will bring about the merging of two good families: “There was no better match for Newland in New York than May Welland” (868).

To Newland, May”s face appears to be “the look of representing a type rather than a person; as if she might have been chosen to pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek goddess” (988). This passage implies that she is a model of what her culture expects and requires of her. Perfectly certain that May will always do the “right thing” and understand him completely, Newland is eager to embark on what he thinks as long years of matrimonial bliss with May (858). After she marries Newland, May remains “the simple girl of yesterday,” preserved in an “indestructible youthfulness” (880, 988). May always keeps “cool” and “boyish” composure because she is sheltered from knowledge and experience that might connect with sexuality (952). For example, when her grandmother congratulates her on winning the contest in archery, she admires the diamond-tipped arrow brooch that is her prize. She jokes with her about the need to leave so valuable a memento to her own daughter. And then May blushes at the thought of having children, after more than a year of marriage, which emphasizes her innocence. May maintains the image of female purity and innocence throughout the novel.

May is part of “the circle of ladies who [are] the product of the system” through which the conservative self-made “aristocrats” in Old New York seeks to perpetuate and protect itself from what it perceived as threatening outside forces (844). May represents hearth and home, the private sphere, the female sphere, which contrasts the world of money, of capitalism, a public dimension and a male one. Newland regards May as a vessel holding all the virtues of home and family-life. May is resolute to do her best in her domestic duty such as managing the household and looking after her husband and children. If she has a choice, she likes to spend time on athletic activities such as mountaineering, swimming, riding, or rowing. The narrator twice mentions May”s big hands meant for playing sports. Although “she
was not a clever needle-woman,” May sits by her husband and tries to do needlework “since other wives embroidered cushions for their husbands she did not wish to omit this last link in her devotion” (1074).

May also plays the role of a hostess to the farewell dinner party for Ellen. It is her first “big dinner, with a hired chef and two borrowed footmen,” and she succeeds in creating the domestic community of the table by preparing everything in detail such as the choice of menu, an impressive guest list, and a certain dress code: “the Roman punch… signified either canvas-backs or terrapin, two soups, a hot and a cold sweet, full décolletage with short sleeves, and guests of a proportionate importance” (1100). May well handles her role in the rite of hospitality, which indicates her power in the social set as well as in her womanhood.

In Writing the Meal, Diane McGee stresses the importance of the woman’s role in preparing dinner so that she not only holds the family together, but also endorses social customs and its values. McGee explains what functions a dinner among the members of a given society fulfils:

To the degree that ostentation, ritual, and the conformation of social values are uppermost at the dinner party, few new ideas are raised, nothing original or surprising can emerge, and festivity is minimal. (58)

At every Thanksgiving dinner, Newland’s mother complains that New York is changing. Her complaints are part of the yearly ritual such as the opening of the season, summer vacation in Newport, and the holiday dinner. These rituals ceased to have any meaning beyond a confirmation of the status quo. Immersed in the ritual of her dinner and her usual ideas, as McGee points out, Mrs. Archer does not in fact see some of the real changes that have occurred. Neither does May notice that the “tight little citadel” of New York has been in decline.

At the dinner, Newland notices May’s wielding a power over her guests gathered for the “tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe” (1105). Newland observes that the ownership of “canvas-backs” enables her to form her “harmless-looking” guests to be “a band of dumb conspirators” to her defense (1106). Although May is aware of Newland’s passion for Ellen, she would neither confront nor reproach him. She keeps the front of naïveté for her “determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the ‘unpleasant’” (859). But, at the same
time, she responds to it in her “innocent” way by manipulating the situation with the help of the social rules and codes. Under the guise of the farewell dinner for Ellen, May and his guests are actually performing a ritual of casting Ellen out “without effusion of blood” (1106). After dinner, Ellen returns to Europe, and the suspicious love affair between Newland and her ends.

Newland once fantasizes that May's veins are filled not with Ellen's "ravaging" blood, but with "preserving fluid" (988). He feels that May will always keep a rein on his rebellious imagination, keep him grounded, and put him securely in touch with the familiar New York world in which people carry out “precise and inflexible” rituals (860). For example, during their honeymoon, confronted by his wife’s prejudices when he wants to invite a French tutor to dinner, Newland thinks: “After all, her point of view had always been the same” (999).

Newland and May live a life dominated by a hierarchical family system in high society that wants to preserve itself at all costs. Old New York systematizes its conventions to be functioned as self-preserving rules: they “tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern” (873). People in Old New York accepted culture as a way of life since it gave them a sense of security and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, they constrain individual conduct and even family members must be sacrificed so that New York would not have to look upon or deal with pain or dishonor.

Newland believes in family dignity, solidarity and the necessity of ignoring the unpleasant. His belief clearly reveals when he dissuades Ellen from divorce, telling her “[Old New York has] rather old-fashioned ideas…. The individual… 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” (928-29). He convinces Ellen that personal happiness is not the most important thing in life.

“Old-fashioned” Newland has a horror of divorce and “a tender reverence” for female purity and innocence (844). He observes in May’s mother a “middle-aged image of invincible innocence” and sees that May has become “simply ripening into a copy of her mother, and… trying to turn him into a Mr. Welland” (954, 1074). Newland also notes that their daughter Mary “yet [leads] a larger life and [holds] more tolerant views,” but she is “no less conventional, and no more intelligent” than her mother May (1116).
Certainly, May Welland succeeds in turning Newland Archer into “a Mr. Welland” (1074). In the last chapter, the reader perceives fifty-seven-year-old Newland “held fast by habit, by memories, by a sudden startled shrinking from new things” (1118). His three children are grown up, and May has been dead for years, having given her life to nursing their youngest child through infectious pneumonia. Over the twenty-six year life span, he reminisces about having “risen up at the call” to politics (dropping “thankfully” into obscurity when not re-elected), having been “a good citizen [and] what was called a faithful husband” (1115). He has settled for his marriage to May as a “dull duty,” comforting himself to the degree that “this did not so much matter so long as it kept the dignity of a duty” (1115).

Although May appears to Newland as an image of purity and as a helpless being, she is not as naïve as he believes. As Margaret McDowell indicates in *Edith Wharton*, May is actually a woman of “considerable strength,” with “a toughness and a tenacity of purpose” (99). In *Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners*, Gary Lindberg draws attention to May’s “clear brow,” which is the sign of her “self-control” rather than the innocence that Newland senses (1074, 107). Carol Wershoven, in *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton*, also suggests that May is neither “her class’s ideal of helpless humanity” nor “a cardboard stereotype” (87). Instead, she is a perceptive, strong-willed, and determined woman who develops into “a person of greater depth” than Newland could ever have imagined (87, 89). Overall, critics highly evaluate May’s character based on her intuitive knowledge of her husband’s love for another woman, and her determination to suffer silently and carry on with her tasks.

Although Newland underestimates May’s strength and her capacity to fight for her interests, his reflection on her after her death makes it clear that May has never developed into “a person of greater depth.” She has remained the same:

[G]enerous, faithful, unwearied; but so lacking in imagination, so incapable of growth, that the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her ever being conscious of the change. (1116)

May’s life is different from Ellen’s because it does not stem from having “look[ed] life in the face,” from having lived it, from having absorbed life experiences and having grown to maturity as a result of them, but rather from remaining impervious to them (998). As Newland correctly judges, May is a successful “creation of factitious purity
so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers, aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses” (875). Women in New York society predetermine May’s failure to evolve into a character of intelligence and individuality. Newland realizes his limits in the sense of “disengag[ing] her real self from the shape into which tradition and training had moulded her” (1100).

May’s character, in spite of her strength and power, does not belong to the group of heroines in nineteenth-century realist novels. Nina Baym in Woman’s Fiction structures a paradigm for healthy adult female identity discovered in those novels. Baym illustrates that these novels typically “chronicle the ‘trials and triumph’ of a heroine who, beset with hardships, finds within herself the abilities of intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage sufficient to overcome them” (22).

In contrast to experienced heroines featured in Baym’s paradigm, the reader sees through Newland’s eyes that May’s appearance of “indestructible youthfulness also makes her seem neither hard nor dull, but only primitive and pure” (988). Newland plans their honeymoon to begin the process of enlightening May. He hopes to show her the best of European culture, complete with a tour of the Italian Lakes. Instead, he discovers May is “morbid[ly]” interested in clothes (993). Newland finally realizes that he cannot transform her suddenly into a woman with “the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, which she had been carefully trained not to possess” (874).

Many of the older New York matrons in the novel reveal a narrow-minded, childish response to their world. Assumed to be incapable of intellectual pursuits, they are to obey their husbands in all things and depend upon their guidance and protection. May’s world of innocence is that which “seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience” (954). Newland comes to doubt the value of innocence:

> It would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman’s eyes, and bid her look forth on the world. But how many generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault? He shivered a little, remembering some of the new ideas in his scientific books, and the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them. What if, when he had bidden May Welland to open hers, they could only look out blankly at blankness? (905)
Newland points out that the power of sight will sink into atrophy when people neglect and stifle it under the guise of years of innocence. He thinks about the woman’s role in his society and realizes the wrongness of imbibing a false innocence in women. He recognizes that in creating this pure creature, his society has produced a person not only unnatural but unprepared for life like a “babe in the wood” (875). Old New York culture conditions May to be “always loyal, gallant and unresentful” rather than developing into a new level of femininity beyond the purely instinctive, unconscious feminine stage (994). Her condition is not unique since she represents her class as a whole.

Settling back with a history book, Newland broods over May’s lack of interest in literature and concludes that he will always know his wife’s thoughts and that “never, in all the years to come, would she surprise him by an unexpected mood, by a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty or an emotion” (1074). Newland realizes that “her abysmal purity” is a myth of his own formulation reinforced by societal myths when he visualizes May as an “image made of snow,” designed to flatter the “lordly pleasure” of the husband who smashes it (844, 875). No matter what philosophical and revolutionary thoughts Newland has, he returns to the conformity to the discipline of New York like his “second nature” (1095). In Edith Wharton, Katharine Joslin mocks Newland, calling him an “armchair feminist” who only wonders, “if a woman does not follow convention and her abilities and talents develop more in line with men, who is she?” (99).

Preferring to view May according to the fiction of the passionless feminine ideal, Newland naively assumes that after their wedding she will epitomize the “niceness” that Old New York cherishes in its women (1006). Yet even as Newland wonders “if ‘niceness’ carried to that supreme degree [is] only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness?,” he continues to misread many signs which suggest that May is not as “nice” or naïve as she seems to be (1006). Instead, he does not bother himself to lift the curtain and look behind it. The reader wonders what Newland avoids looking at. Is it just the “emptiness,” or an ironic awareness behind the curtain that may be so powerful as to shock him?

May lives only to give birth to children and to nurture them until they are ready to be on their own. Although she is conventional and limited, she is certainly at the center of power in New York society. The novel portrays Old New York as a “tight
little citadel,” which tends to emphasize the primitive, defensive, and self-protective nature (863). New York society women including May are housewives and mothers, and for the sake of the children born and yet unborn, they want security, material comfort and the status quo. She has no life of her own apart from her child. Society would exclude elements that might cause discomfort, disturb the status quo, or stimulate change. Therefore, people organize their public and private lives based on strict codes and conventions, which mostly women uphold in order to solidify society and maintain its social and economic values. Clearly, women have become the hub around which society revolves because men are unable to give birth to children.

In Disorderly Conduct, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg views Victorian America as “specifically female world” that was “built around a generic and unself-conscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks. These supportive networks were institutionalized in social conventions or rituals that accompanied virtually every important event in a woman’s life, from birth to death” (60). In “Purity and Power in The Age of Innocence,” Judith Fryer also indicates that the repetitive rituals of the novel are the signs of “a female society” (159). In such a separate society, according to Michelle Rosaldo, purity rituals become important with norms for “strict dress and demeanor, modesty, cleanliness, prudishness” as devices for contrasting their world with the men’s world that establishes grounds for order and status (38).

Regarding May’s feminine strength and power, in Essays on a Science of Mythology, C. G. Jung and C. Kerenyi note the awareness of continuity between mothers and daughters:

We could say that every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter. This participation and inner-mingling give rise to that particular uncertainty as regards time; a woman lives earlier as a mother, later as a daughter. The conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that her life is spread out over generations. The first step towards the immediate experience and conviction of being outside time, brings with it a feeling of immortality. (qtd. in Castillejo 58)
Through the mother-daughter relationship, a woman lives an immortal life. Women carry the maternal function that has the divine qualities. Newland also thinks of her as a Diana or a nymph with a “fruit-like cheek”: “Archer saw May Welland entering with her mother. In her dress of white and silver, with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair, the tall girl looked like a Diana just alight from the chase” (904, 891).

In *Myths and Legends of All Nations* Herbert Spencer Robinson and Knox Wilson illustrate Diana who is the Roman goddess of the hunt as well as the goddess of chastity (134). The virgin goddess of the chase, she never marries, never experiencing either the joys or the sorrows of love. Diana cures the ailments and solves the problems of mortals and also imposing evil and suffering upon them. Women in childbirth pray to her for aid; the arrows of Diana bring sudden death to those whom they strike. In “Athena, Artemis, Aphrodite, and Initiation into the Conscious Feminine,” Jean Bolen mentions the Artemis archetype in every woman: “Artemis, the Greek goddess of the hunt and moon, the only goddess who came to the aid of her mother, had women companions, and preferred to be in the wilderness” (219). Bolen emphasizes that the strong bond of sisterhood with other women and with Mother Nature characterizes Artemis.

May’s performance in “a feat of strength” at the Newport archery contest adds dimensions of competence and assurance to her character and compares her, both in her chaste temperament and in her prowess, to Diana (1006). She walks beside Newland and “her face wore the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete”; at another point, Newland notices that her smile is “Spartan” (951, 1073).

May’s careful, knowing control of her situation contrasts with Newland’s ignorance, which makes the title of the novel ironic. May seems to perceive too far and too deeply into the unconscious for people to be comfortable around her as they recognize her female intuition. She is apt to sense what is happening before it becomes manifest in outer life and communicates her intuition in thought and action. For instance, May’s “slowly and laboriously stabbing” at the embroidery canvas silently protests Newland’s suspected infidelity (1074).

To suit her own ends, May also plays primitive, instinctive tricks on people and situations. Yet May remains “inscrutable” to her husband even though she appears “frank, poor darling, because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew
nothing to be on her guard against” (842, 875). Later, Newland rightly hypothesizes that “untrained human nature was not frank and innocent; it was full of the twists and defenses of an instinctive guile” (875).

May goes to Ellen without her husband’s knowledge and prematurely announces that she is pregnant in order to pressure Ellen to give up her affair with Newland voluntarily. But she has kept hidden from Newland the details of her “really good talk” with Ellen except the reports that “I think she understands everything” (1090, 1099). This maneuver proves to Newland and to the reader that she has lied to Ellen about her condition. May is not so much innocent as calculating. Judith Saunder points out in “Becoming the Mask: Edith Wharton’s Ingenues” that innocence required in young women is “a mask more than a reality” (35). Two weeks later, May finds herself pregnant and Ellen packed and off to Europe. She acknowledges to her husband that she has not been honest: “No; I wasn’t sure then—but I told her I was. And you see I was right!” she exclaimed, her blue eyes wet with victory” (1112). In “Forms of Disembodiment: The Social Subject in The Age of Innocence,” Pamela Knights calls May “the lovers’ malign and implacable enemy” (31).

Other instances also reveal that May is a strategist of the sharpest kind. Although she does not voice what she knows, she conveys her perceptions whether or not she means to do so. A word here and there, a casual question or an observation that appears random and meaningless, makes its point with regard to what Newland must do, how he ought to behave. When May detects a household threat in Ellen, she expresses her challenge in an exchange about a smoking lamp: “They smell less if one blows them out,” she explained, with her bright housekeeping air” (1052). Newland cannot deceive her about his business trip to Washington. May penetrates through his alibi and urges him, “You must be sure to go and see Ellen,” but, “in the code in which they had both been trained it meant: […] ‘Since you are sure to see her, I wish you to do so with my full and explicit approval’” (1052).

In this scene, May bears an oil lamp, which reminds the reader of the parable of the virgins who keep oil in their lamps for the coming of the bridegroom. In this New Testament context, oil symbolizes the feminine quality. Concerning the imagery of the woman who bears the lamp, Irene de Castillejo in Knowing Woman interprets it: “if she can hold the oil ready within the lamp, then, when the masculine spark comes, there
burns a flame which is alive, and lights our human world. This flame is Love” (57). May blames Newland for not playing his part as a loving husband in an allusion to a malfunctioning lamp that smokes rather than lights.

May successfully manages to keep her husband without taking the role of outrageous wife. She has become a so-called wise wife by developing skill in coping with her husband and the situation between them. Yet she knows little or nothing about literature or art and has a hard time making interesting conversation. Newland thinks that May is naïve and provincial even though she says to him “‘You mustn’t think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine,’ … ‘one hears and one notices—one has one’s feelings and ideas’” (957).

When Newland visits her in St. Augustine to hasten the wedding, she knows before Newland does that he has fallen in love with another woman even though she does not yet know it is Ellen. She mistakenly believes it is his former mistress, Mrs. Rushworth. However, her intuition tells her what he does not face openly. He wishes to hasten their marriage to avoid temptation, but she refuses to allow him to build their future on such shaky ground, offering instead to break off their engagement.

Furthermore, she encourages him to marry the woman he loves even if doing so has to involve a divorce:

“I couldn’t have my happiness made out of a wrong—a wrong to someone else.”… I’ve wanted to tell you that, when two people really love each other, I understand that there may be situations which make it right that they should—should go against public opinion. (957)

Obviously, she understands the need to rise above convention when it is narrow and hypocritical. Morgan explains May’s act against the conventions: “May’s qualification for the acceptability of breaking social codes is deep and enduring love, and this leads us to the last charge against her character” (36). Newland senses something “superhuman” in her suggestion that he should marry his former mistress (958).

While he is married to May, he continues to recognize in his wife “the passionate generosity latent under that incurious calm” as well as “the same reaching towards something beyond the usual range of her vision,” but he ignores them (1095, 1090). At this point, the reader wonders what is the essence of the “superhuman” nature in May’s character.
Castillejo attempts to explain the difference between the masculinity and the femininity based on Neumann’s depiction of the masculine ego emergence from the feminine matrix of the unconscious. According to Castillejo, the “focused consciousness” of the ego is masculine whether in man or woman, but that there is a layer of more “diffuse awareness,” which is feminine in character (62). In “On the Moon and Matriarchal Consciousness,” Neumann distinguishes “the matriarchal consciousness” from “the patriarchal consciousness”:

For matriarchal consciousness, understanding is not an act of the intellect, functioning as an organ for swift registration, development and organization; rather it has the meaning of a “conception.” Whatever has to be understood must first “enter” matriarchal consciousness in the full, sexual, symbolic meaning of a fructification. This means that the conceiving and understanding have brought about a personality change. The new content has stirred the whole being, whereas in patriarchal consciousness it would too often only have been filed in one intellectual pigeon-hole or another. (qtd. in Castillejo 61-62)

Castillejo makes it clear that difference of consciousnesses is not a question of sex at all, but of a masculine or feminine attitude of mind because it is possible that both beings are latent in every individual. Castillejo further develops Neumann’s theory on matriarchal consciousness in light of its characteristically divine quality:

The comparative passivity of matriarchal consciousness is not due to any incapacity for action, but rather to an awareness of subjection to a process in which it can “do” nothing, but can only “let happen.” In all decisive life situations, the feminine, in a far greater degree than the nothing-but-masculine, is subjected to the numinous elements in nature or still better, has them “brought home” to it. Therefore, its relation to nature and to God is more familiar and intimate, and its tie to an anonymous Transpersonal allegiance forms earlier and goes deeper than its personal tie to a man. (62)

Castillejo acknowledges the impossibility of distinguishing between the “feminine diffuse awareness” and “masculine focused consciousness” in comprehensible terms. Yet Castillejo emphasizes that “feminine diffuse awareness” is not the formless chaos
of the unconscious. Castillejo asserts that its “whole unbroken state defies scientific analysis and logical deduction” (62). Newland’s “masculine” approach to his wife’s consciousness does not lead him to understand the “superhuman” quality in her. May remains as an enigma to him.

Interestingly, in “Convention in the Fiction of Edith Wharton,” Mary Suzanne Schriber discusses how “unconventional” May is in her conquest of Newland and in her victory over Ellen: “Her means… are unconventional and therefore invisible to Archer…. Instead, she in public proceeds quietly and unobtrusively (as a lady should) to eliminate her rival while avoiding even a private confrontation with Archer on the subject of Ellen” (199). Schriber praises May’s quiet and unassuming manner of handling the affair of her husband without undermining their relationship as man and wife. The representation of May subverts the notion of the American Girl as a child who is “to be manipulated, not manipulative” (Orlando 70).

Nevertheless, we cannot say that unconventionality characterizes May. May is clever in tricks rather than unconventional and unique like Ellen. As likely as not, May develops her intuition to a functional degree to attain her goal, which is making her marriage a success. May is the primitive type of woman in nature, whose attention is focused instinctively on her husband. Jung illustrates the fundamental biological relations between the sexes. Her biological aim is the major guide in life, as Jung says:

> The exaggeration of the feminine side means an intensification of all female instincts, above all the maternal instinct. The negative aspect is seen in the woman whose only goal is childbirth. To her the husband is … first and foremost the instrument of procreation, and she regards him merely as an object to be looked after, along with children, poor relations, cats, dogs, and household furniture. (qtd. in Castillejo 60)

From this perspective, all that is important for a woman in nature is that she is attractive to her husband and holds his interest. Accordingly, in order to keep her husband happy, May might have to reserve a part of her reactions, giving him her feelings that she calculates to be good for him. May lives her life as unconsciously as the most remote ancestress and dies content to be only man’s wife, believing that world is "a good place, full of loving and harmonious households" (1116). She was unaware that Old New York is transitioning in manners and values and destined toward its “Atlantis-fate” (BG
Moreover, the kind of femininity these women represented is often quite primitive and conservative. This is the Feminine archetype in its most archaic form, where instinct resists spiritual transformation at any cost.

The reader notes that May’s psyche does not experience a conflict between the simple need stimulated by Mother Nature and the personal need to develop herself into being a separate individual. Apparently, the predominance of instinct makes her unconscious of her own personality and robs her of the fullness of her own experience. Wharton metaphorically describes typical Old New Yorkers as the “little atrophied organ” hidden under the thick clothes—“the group of idle & dull people that exists in any big and wealthy social body” (Letters 96-97). May never develops “the courage to look at things as they are,” so that she can mature into genuine adulthood (The French Ways and Their Meaning 58). May’s development into mature adulthood has been stunted and eventually atrophied. In French Ways and Their Meaning (1919), Wharton criticizes Old New York for its atrophied state of life in the guise of preserving the family in a traditional sense:

Things are not always everywhere well with the world, and each man has to find it out as he grows up. It is the finding out that makes him grow, and until he has faced the fact and digested the lesson he is not grown up—he is still in the nursery. The same is true of countries and peoples. The “sheltered life,” whether of the individual or the nation, must either have a violent and tragic awakening—or never wake up at all. (65)

Wharton clarifies that a society that refuses to acknowledge anything unpleasant is not so much innocent as self-willed and culpably ignorant; or it is “still in its childhood… till a society ceases to be afraid of the truth in the domain of ideas” (58-59). Resisting responsibility in their lives, Wharton’s fictional characters from Old New York never wake up at all, and, even worse, they do not want to. For example, although the presence of Ellen precipitates Newland’s premarital anxieties, he ignores them and gets married to keep the view of life based upon partial truths and convenient falsehoods. Accordingly, his marriage ends up becoming what most of the other marriages surrounding him are: “a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other” (874).
May skillfully manages her home to be a safe and “sheltered” place, where nothing can happen and thus no one lives a life unless it is the “rosy life-in-death” (880). Newland senses a “narcotic” power in the world of luxurious Wellands’ house that is “so charged with minute observations and emotions” (1011). The interiors of the Wellands’s home are to produce the illusion:

The heavy carpets, the watchful servants, the perpetually reminding tick of disciplined clocks, the perpetually renewed stack of cards and invitations on the hall table, the whole chain of tyrannical trifles binding one hour to the next, and each member of the household to all the others, made any less systematised and affluent existence seem unreal and precarious. (1011-12)

The Wellands’ living room evokes the feeling of security in Newland, but at the same time, its dense atmosphere has a numbing effect on his nerves. Newland acknowledges that “reality” awaits him with May and his family ruled by clocks and dinners. His “real” life passes before him like a hallucination.

He regards his life with May as monotonous and passionless because “he was weary of living in a perpetual tepid honeymoon, without the temperature of passion yet with all its exactions” (1073). May keeps Newland unaware not only of a lack of reality in her reactions, but also of the fact that life is routine and dull. Their home is not the place for relationships in life, which nurture, protect and comfort so that growth can take place. Newland soon feels “oppressed” by domesticity that May represents (875).

Months later, Ellen and Newland happen to sit together in May’s carriage when Ellen returns from Washington D. C. because of her grandmother’s illness. Desperately in love, Newland suggests to Ellen that they escape to a place where they would be able to freely enjoy their love, where they would be “simply two human beings who love each other; and nothing else on earth will matter” (1070). Ellen responds to Newland with ironic remarks:

We're near each other only if we stay far from each other. Then we can be ourselves. Otherwise we're only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska's cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer's wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trust them. (1070)
Ellen encourages Newland to look “not at visions, but at realities” (1069). But unable to face the realities, Newland gets out of the carriage and walks away “perceiv[ing] that he had been crying, and that the wind had frozen his tears” (1071).

He comes to think of domestic life as a kind of life-in-death in which he has become fatally buried. Wharton emphasizes this image by describing his entrapment in the library with May as “stifling” (1074). One winter evening in his library, watching May as she sews, Newland opens the window in need of “a little air”:

The mere fact of not looking at May, seated beside his table, under his lamp, the fact of seeing other houses, roofs, chimneys, of getting the sense of other lives outside his own, other cities beyond New York, and a whole world beyond his world, cleared his brain and made it easier to breathe. (1074)

He looks out the window to “a whole world beyond,” which recalls the traditional American hero who looks to the landscape and the frontier for escape from a domesticated world.

Newland yearns to be a romantic hero whose goal is to get beyond society. This scene suggests that he wants what his name implies, some “new land” or territory outside the web of his culture, beyond the constraints of his community in New York. Mid-twentieth-century critics such as Henry Nash Smith, Richard Chase, and R. W. B. Lewis theorized that it was the American male and his search for a new frontier that made American literature particularly American. Baym in “Melodramas of Beset Manhood” also mentions that the American myth has become exclusively male in the sense that “the pure American self… that in this new land, untrammeled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition” (131-32). Society becomes “something artificial and secondary to human nature,” and “exerts an unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality” (Baym 132).

In spite of his desire for “self-definition” through discovering himself outside society, Newland keeps failing to do: “What am I? A son-in-law--” (1010). Newland is in despair even though there is no definite catastrophe. What he has lost or he has wished for is not really concrete. Certainly, he has many wishes, but they are vague such as freedom, love, and a varied life. Neither omniscient nor unprejudiced, Newland does not have the power to be articulate. If Newland could do so himself, he would no
longer be what he is, he would have outgrown himself and saved himself from the prolonged state of dilemma. Newland’s dream of a life that transcends social boundaries remains unattainable.

Soon May’s caution brings him back to the reality, reminding him that his world has no place for retreat to individuate a self: “Newland! Do shut the window. You’ll catch your death” (1074). May’s restriction from even opening a window implies that “a whole world beyond” leads to dangers or even the death. Newland can understand May exactly because her message always follows standard code: “The persons of their world lived in an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies…. [They] understood each other without a word” (852). Old New York has a ritual language that, although unspoken, it uses exclusively to express the most important thoughts.

Thanks to their mutual understanding, as man and wife Newland and May never quarrel over any substantial conflict. But their marriage is not a model of matrimonial happiness or companionship at all. Dallas describes his parents’ marriage to his father: “You just sat and watched each other, and guessed at what was going on underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum, in fact!” (1122). Jill Kress in The Figure of Consciousness uncovers “the paradox of this permeability of consciousness” in that understanding each other’s thoughts destroys intimacy rather than nurtures it (168). Then the possibility for a meaningful relationship disappears.

Newland feels hopeless and defeated about his marriage to May: “I am dead—I’ve been dead for months and months” (1075, original emphasis). Furthermore, he fantasizes that May’s death would set him free:

And suddenly the play of the word flashed up a wild suggestion.
What if it were she who was dead! If she were going to die—to die soon—and leave him free! The sensation of […] wishing her dead, was so fascinating and overmastering, that its enormity did not immediately strike him. (1075)

Newland thinks about his own death and then May’s death as a solution for his despair. Death would remove the necessity for action, in order for him to be free. In the meantime, his dilemma resolves itself when he turns to a private and alterative world, which he calls “reality”: 
He had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she [Ellen] throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities. Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-mined man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room. (1048)

An escape to “inside himself” allows him to cherish his desire for Ellen while trapped in a marriage. He counts his imagined life with Ellen his “real” life, and confesses to her that “the only reality to me is this” when they are alone in May’s carriage (1069). He seems to associate the “real” with his imagined life alongside Ellen, and the “unreal” with his actual life with May (1012). His remote “worship” of Ellen maintains a distant relationship with her, but it excludes an intimacy with his wife: “He thought of Ellen Olenska ‘as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or pictures: she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed” (1115). Newland thinks this is the terrible secret he has harbored, holding it inside by an “iron band” around his heart (1123).

Newland, a free man at last, travels to Paris to stand beneath the windows of Ellen whom he has loved in tormented secrecy for almost thirty years. To Newland, Ellen is still a “vision” that represents the missed opportunity, “the flower of life” (1115). However, instead of the reunion with Ellen, the novel ends with his discovery that May had always known of his love for Ellen and his “sacrifice” (1004). Newland finally wakes up and realizes that a life apart from his all-loving, even dead wife is impossible:

He had to deal all at once with the packed regrets and stifled memories of an inarticulate lifetime. After a little while he did not regret Dallas’s indiscretion. It seemed to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all, some one had guessed and pitied. . . . And that it should have been his wife moved him indescrably. (1123) Newland’s “iron band” around his heart resonates in “The Frog-King, or Iron Henry” a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm. In “The Personal and Cultural Emergence of Yang-
Femininity,” Genia Haddon summarizes the story of Iron Henry, the king’s faithful servant:

He had been so unhappy while his master was a frog that he had caused three iron bands to be laid around his heart, lest it should burst with grief. Now he is so full of joy because of this deliverance that the bands spring from his heart one after another with great cracking sounds, which the young king at first interprets as the carriage breaking apart. (250; emphasis added)

Newland really feels sorry to his wife for rendering his marriage as perfunctory, as dry as possible in order to keep psychological fidelity to Ellen. His heart is touched by May’s love that is all-accepting even his adulterous desire for Ellen. Above all, his heart is filled with regrets for the life he has not lived.

His head-on perspective of his marriage causes distortion and confusion. As McDowell notes, his “egocentric temperament” limits his imagination and keeps him from seeing May as a woman instead of a stereotype (62). Lacan might say that such a perception produces “anamorphosis,” that is, “a figure enlarged and distorted according to the lines of what are called a perspective” (qtd. in Zizek 85). Newland views only the repression, the narrowness, the stifling, unimaginative life that entraps him. From his position of being “a wild animal cunningly trapped,” he fails to notice complexities and subtleties that keep him trapped (893).

Newland, at the novel’s end, is left little changed from the young “dilettante” for whom “thinking over a pleasure to come often gave…a subtler satisfaction than its realization” (842). Rather than actually loving May and Ellen, he cherishes their images in his memory. In his case, Wharton makes it clear that the fantasy is not only pleasurable but also preferable because it is more safe. May, however, loves her husband and the New York society and thrives within its bounds and is capable of appreciating and preserving what is good in the old order. She recognizes the times when one can and should act contrary to its conventions and traditions and does so herself when she feels it to be necessary.

Honoring his long-married life, Newland concludes that although he has lost “the flower of life,” he has gained the dignity that comes with fulfilling his duty: “After all, there was good in the old ways” (1115). He says to himself, “it’s more real to me
here than if I went up”; and “the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge” sends him slowly back to the hotel and eventually to his library where “most of the real things of his life have happened” (1113). Lewis comments on Newland’s inability to realize his “grande passion” for Ellen and calls Newland “poor Archer” (qtd. in Orlando 56).

On the other hand, Hermione Lee, in her recent biography Edith Wharton, notes Wharton’s warning throughout the novel against the danger of post-war American isolationism. The life of Old New York in the 1870’s and 1880’s was free and undisturbed by major crises: “The whole novel has exposed the damaging limitations of an inward-looking, defensive and parochial American history, which Newland’s love for Ellen made him struggle to reach beyond” (581). Nevertheless, Old New York, the extended family network, is to be conquered by “invaders,” as Newland reflects: “There was always a traitor in the citadel; and after he (or generally she) had surrendered the keys, what was the use of pretending that it was impregnable?” (1046).

In a 1921 letter, Wharton described a projected sequel to The Age of Innocence. The novel was entitled “Homo Sapiens,”… [and] would be about the son of Newland who marries Beaufort’s illegitimate daughter at the end of the novel. Newland and Ellen would reappear, and Homo Sapiens would of course be the omniscient youth of the present date, who has settled in advance all social, religious and moral problems, and yet comes to grief over the same old human difficulties. (9 Nov 1921, Wharton Collection Yale, qtd. in Olin-Ammentorp 178).

The modern generation would have swept away “the sign-posts” and “the danger-signal” in Old New York to create a world where “all the social atoms spun around on the same plane” (937, 1124, 1120). With telephones and Atlantic crossings, the boundaries would seem to be gone. The automobile would have reduced provincialism. As many people welcomed the collapse of old barriers and enjoyed the sensation of the movement itself, speed had become a symbol of vitality, a magnification of the possibilities of experience. This phenomenal “compression of time and space” along with the development of capitalism and particular technology, penetrated into people’s sense of time and space (Harvey 205). However, as her letter suggests, Wharton was
skeptical of the new era because she believed that the realities of life and human frailty preclude the possibilities of perfect happiness and romance.

The reader of *The Age of Innocence* also acknowledges that the new era has its drawbacks. After criticizing the “deaf-and-dumb” marriage of his parents, Dallas admits, “Well, I back your generation for knowing more about each other’s private thoughts than we ever have time to find out about our own” (1122). Although frankness, openness, and experiment are characteristic of the new era, it does not have time for self-knowledge, not to mention deep knowledge of another. In *The House of Mirth* (1905), Wharton created Lily Bart, who follows the generation of Newland and May, and Wharton showed how her lack of self-knowledge would lead to points of growth through her experiences of conflicts and failures.
NOTES

1. A good example in the novel can be the Matriarch of society, Catherine “the Great,” who began her career as a colorful Spicer of Staten Island, “with a father mysteriously discredited, and neither the money nor position enough to make people forget it” (848-49). Yet she gained her position by allying herself with “the head of the wealthy Mingott line” (849).

2. According to David Harvey, ”annihilation of space through time“ (205), is essential to get through the crisis of capitalism’s overaccumulation in the nineteenth century. Historically, the rapid imperial expansion from the 1870s to the 1930s could provide a spatial solution to the crisis of overaccumulation. Harvey calls this phenomenon ”time-space compression,” which occurred because of the desire for accelerated production.
CHAPTER TWO
No Exit: Soul-Seeking Lily Bart in The House of Mirth

In The House of Mirth (1905), Wharton presents a heroine who “fails” in her traditional role. Wharton describes Lily as a “girl... who rouged, smoked, ran into debt, borrowed money, gambled, and… went home with a bachelor friend to take tea in his flat!” (qtd. in Goodwyn 61). Wharton refuses to have Lily fulfill the role of the traditional novels’ protagonist who is brave, decisive, strong, and accomplished. At the end of the novel, Wharton let Lily die from an overdose of chloral, an ending that disturbs many readers. One irate reader in 1906 interpreted Lily’s downfall as “an injustice wrought by the cruel author”: “It was bad enough that you had the heart to kill Lily. But here you are, shamelessly parading the streets in a red hat!” (qtd. in Benstock 155).

Wharton is aware of her audience’s ambivalence as she recalled: “I knew that (owing to my refusal to let the heroine survive) it was foredoomed to failure” (BG 147). It seems that in writing the story of a failed character, Wharton voluntarily took the risk of failing to win the hearts of her audience. Wharton sets Lily up to fail and to suffer, blocking her at every point in her efforts to realize the social ambitions for which she was striving. Wharton, by subjecting Lily to a chain of situations such as debts, a threat of rape, disinheritance, and a fall from social grace, forced her heroine into a self-discovery that shocked early readers of the novel.

Although Lily seems defeated in life, her power as a character comes from her inward resistance to her social role, which is to be born and bred to be the creature of wealth, and from Wharton’s placing her in situations that make unreasonable demands on her growing sense of morality. James MacArthur notes that Wharton neither surrenders to “the optimistic mood which is supposed to dominate American readers,” nor evades “the inexorable logic of life” (Wharton Collection Yale). Wharton makes it clear throughout The House of Mirth that Lily does not want a conventional notion of success, and it is her very “failure” in the social game that makes Lily a heroine. This chapter will seek to understand the unpopular but powerful truth Wharton uncovers, which is Lily’s innate power of femininity through her quest for soul.
Lily was born into an aristocratic family in Old New York, but her parents died bankrupt, leaving her with no money. In order to remain in high society, the patrician orphan has “to go into partnership” with a wealthy man (12). Lily pursues what she conceives of as her happiness by making every effort to do what leads to marriage; she needs a man who has money and social power. She dreams of a marriage which will realize her desire for aristocratic rootedness but also wants a union of shared thoughts and sensibility.

In short, Lily wants “the house not built with the hands but made up of inherited passions and loyalties” (336). She often fantasizes about a husband who is an "English nobleman with political ambitions and vast estates; or, for second choice, an Italian prince with a castle in the Apennines and a hereditary office in the Vatican" (36-37). She wants a man to provide her with the means “to arrange her life as she pleased, to soar into that empyrean of security,” and “the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste” (54).

Lily begins her quest for happiness by periodically leaving Mrs. Peniston’s house, which is “as dreary as a prison,” and by working herself into a group of wealthy socialites in New York (114). Julia Peniston, Lily’s guardian, is the widowed sister of Lily’s father. The novel describes Mrs. Peniston as a person who has “moral mauvais honte” but is selfish at her heart (38). Not only is hypocrisy characteristic of Mrs. Peniston, but she is also a “looker-on at life” (39). She watches “from the depths of an impenetrable domesticity” but refuses to engage the world (39). Lily belongs to the leisure class of Old New Yorkers who have always “lived well, dressed expensively, and done little else” (38). Wharton, however, makes it clear that this closed and closely-knit community of Old New York is rapidly disappearing into the twentieth-century city of crowds, speed, and new money.

In No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton. Shari Benstock notes the *nouveau riche*’s indulgence in “gambling, drinking, stock market speculation, and extra-marital affairs” (311). Lily cannot turn to her aunt for support because Mrs. Peniston is from a generation that abhors modern indulgence. Whereas Lily’s New York is the city of “conspicuous consumption,” in Thorstein Veblen’s terms, Mrs.
Peniston embodies the secure world behind drawing-room blinds to shut out the glare of the afternoon light and spotless mantelpieces.

The Van Alstynes and the Penistons represent the aristocratic families of Old New York. Old-fashioned Mrs. Peniston lives under the rules of “copy-book axioms” from the early 1850s. W. R. M’Phun in The Young Lady’s Book of Advice and Instruction (1859) emphasizes the quality of “modesty” because it is “the chief ornament of the female character” (qtd. in Yeazell 11). Aunt Peniston’s copy-book rules clash with Lily’s self-definition as a beautiful object to be sold to the highest bidder in the marriage market. When we juxtapose these books with the character Lily, the leisure class requires a great deal more of its women. To Lily, life with her aunt and people in her set is constricting, so she must try on her own to make her way in high society.

The original title of the novel, “A Moment’s Ornament,” ironically echoes that the role assigned to women in New York society is ornamental. A genteel lady is brought up to be a beautiful object of art by learning how to shape and present her physical assets in order to attract men. Her main role in life is to develop a persona that will be useful in promoting her husband’s ambition. Wharton tells us that “[Lily’s] inherited tendencies combined with early training” make her a highly specialized product as well as a decorative object for her prospective husband (5). Lily is described as “some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom, of her beauty” (334). Lily believes in “the power of her own beauty to do good” (36).

Lily wants exactly what her socially constructed gender identity has molded her for, which is wealthy marriage, even though she experiences the social pressures defining marriage as the primary goal of a woman’s existence. Hunting for a husband for whom she can act as “the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on” is her “vocation” (9). She tells Lawrence Selden: “A girl must [marry to escape the horrors of a dingy life], a man may if he chooses” (10).

At the beginning of the novel twenty-nine-year-old Lily is on the verge of social exclusion because she has neither a husband nor money. After “eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing,” Lily not only has failed to catch a husband, but has also realized that marriage for money and social position leads her to rich but “dull and
ugly people” such as Percy Gryce, who is phlegmatic, narrowly self-centered, and conventional, or the dyspeptic George Dorset, or Simon Rosedale, a Jewish outsider (5).

Above all, for a woman whose self-definition heavily depends on her mirror, it is disheartening for Lily to see her value as a marriageable woman decreasing. Although Lily tries to keep herself valuable as a beautiful commodity, she has become jaded and is aging. Wharton's first idea for the novel's title, “A Moment’s Ornament,” suggests that she means Lily to be briefly ornamental. This intention is echoed in “The Year of Rose,” another title Wharton was considering (Wharton Collection Yale). These tentative titles hint at the transient nature of Lily’s beauty.

Although Lily realizes that market relations prevail in her association with society people, what she discovers is much worse than she expected. There is no such thing as true hospitality in the house of mirth, and she can no longer depend on her beauty alone to maintain her desirability as a guest. In order to compensate for being a guest in the house of mirth, she is forced to play bridge for money and to do secretarial work for her hostess. An “atmosphere of luxury” surrounds Lily, which belongs to “other people,” and she “pay[s]” for its use with her good looks and social skills (27). Although Lily comes to resent the empty charade of dinners, parties, and trips that make up the life of high society, it is the only world she has known since birth. Watching Lily measure out tea, Selden imagines the links of her bracelet as “manacles chaining her to her fate” (7). He views Lily as “the victim of the civilization which had produced her” because she is too truthful and too moral for the corrupt materialist world (7).

Twenty-nine-year-old Lily awakens to loneliness and alienation, a loneliness that is not solely based on the inability to find a husband. She feels lonely because she realizes that her manners, training, and gracefulness are tinged with artificial values by an exchange system that prizes them more than human qualities. She finds that marketing her beauty, her only asset, has nothing to do with her feelings and a sense of her own intrinsic value.

Lily accepts her status as a beautiful commodity, but she also challenges her society’s conception of female identity as marital ornament. She sarcastically tells Selden: “[A] woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself”(12). In spite of her insights, she is not drawn to further self-inquiry: “She was always scrupulous about keeping up appearances to herself. 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” (85).

In Feminist Dialogics, Dale Bauer attributes Lily’s deliberate avoidance of moral reflection to socio-economic necessity: “In this economy of exchange, she must renounce her desire for a powerful sense of self in order to participate in the market” (94). Likewise, C. B. Macpherson, in The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke, discusses the essence of English and American capitalism:

If a single criterion of the possessive market society is wanted, it is that man’s labour is commodity, i.e., that a man’s energy and skill are his own, yet are regarded not as integral parts of his personality, but as possessions, the use and disposal of which he is free to hand over to others for a price. (48)

“Possessive market society” implies that where labor has become a market commodity, market relations shape or permeate social relations. Macpherson calls this state a market society, not merely a market economy. Therefore, we can say that the fact of a non-physical inner world is a difficult idea for “market society” people even though they talk about inward realities such as “soul” and “spirit.” The inhabitants of Wharton’s Gilded-Age culture resist believing in these spiritual concepts because the market society has caused them to lose contact with an inner life and with its symbolism. This is true of Lily who aspires to join the materialistic environment of social ambition. Rather than seeking the higher ideas and spiritual needs of humanity, her mission is to “adorn and delight” (316).

Not surprisingly, Wharton denies the traditional plot of domestic happiness in the market society of modernized Old New York. None of the couples in the novel are happily married. Gus and Judy Trenor, the most socially prominent couple, merely cohabit. Judy is willing to let female friends entertain her husband but resents their exacting favors from the gullible, lascivious Gus. Judy’s main emotion is “hatred” toward any other woman who might give a more impressive house party while she remains indifferent to her husband and marriage. After “some forty years of futile activity,” Judy can “exist only as a hostess, not so much from any exaggerated instinct of hospitality as because she could not sustain life except in a crowd” (40). Bertha Dorset, on the other hand, shows a more active discontent in her emotionally sterile
marriage to George. She engages in affair after affair but always maintains some cover to keep her wealthy spouse paying the bills.

In “‘The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object’: Double Standard and Double Bind in The House of Mirth,” Judith Fetterley points out that the examples of “deadly” marriage provide “an image of Lily’s future were she to marry someone like Percy” (205). Even during courtship she laments that she must woo him and “must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all for the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life” (23).

Lily observes that in New York society, men compete with one another in battles for vast fortunes whereas the wife’s duty is to consume products that show her husband’s material success rather than to create a haven in which her husband can rest. These women idolized society and, beyond their public arrangements, shared no private affection, sense of loyalty or trust among the women in their group. Fetterley indicates that the relationships between “beautiful objects” are “hostile and competitive rather than ‘supportive’” (203). Elizabeth Ammons also views the patriarchal system in New York as one designed to “keep women in divisive and relentless competition” for a few prestigious positions controlled by men:

Forbidden to aggress on each other directly, or aggress on men at all, women prey on each other—stealing reputations, opportunities, male admirers—all to parlay or retain status and financial security in a world arranged by men to keep women suppliant and therefore subordinate.

(qtd. in Showalter 140)

Therefore, the patriarchal mentality has driven feminine values of feeling, relatedness, and soul consciousness out of the culture in New York society.

In this regard, Lily reveals her highly developed masculine side of mentality when she expresses to Selden her thoughts about what is like to be a part of New York society: “I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, when one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time” (49-50). Lily is unsatisfied with this manner of relatedness because the relationships are false:
When she had ceased to amuse Judy Trenor and her friends she would have to fall back on amusing Mrs. Peniston; whichever way she looked she saw only a future of servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager *individuality.*” (106; emphasis added)

This passage suggests how much effort it takes for Lily to maintain her wealth; at crucial moments, she hates herself for what she desires. Carrie Fisher, who makes a business out of teaching newcomers to navigate New York society, sums up the master plot of Lily’s life: “She works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic…. Sometimes I think it’s because, at heart, she despises the things she’s trying for” (197). Although Lily longs “to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself,” she cannot help asking herself, “What manner of life would it be?” (40).

To Lily, who has fancied an escape from the imperative to marry, Selden suggests the possibility for a woman living alone. In response, Lily mentions her childhood friend, Selden’s cousin, Gerty Farish, who is a social worker. Even though Gerty lives on her own and “likes to be good,” Gerty’s life represents the dingy one she fears: “[S]he has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap” (8). In Lily’s view, if leisure-class women are “economic parasites,” Gerty, who works, is “a parasite in the moral order, living on the crumbs of other tables, and content to look through the window at the banquet spread for her friends” (158).

Lily’s cousin, middle-age like Grace Stepney, also personifies her fears of the future: poverty, spinsterhood, and social ugliness. Grace lives in a drab boarding house, excluded from dinner parties and dependent on their Aunt Peniston’s charity. The fear of turning into Grace panics Lily. Gerty’s and Grace’s lives as single women offer nothing for Lily to emulate. She cries out to Gerty, “I want admiration, I want excitement, I want money—yes, money!” (175).

Nevertheless, Selden attacks Lily’s social climbing and predicts a miserable future if she continues to pursue her present goal to “fight against [dinginess], dragging herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch” (40). Lily claims that success is
the ability “‘to get as much as one can out of life’” (70). To this admission, Selden tells her to imitate him in remaining detached from people in the house of mirth and their material world. As an alternative, he invites her to join in the “republic of the spirit,” which offers freedom “from everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit—that’s what I call success” (71).

To Lily, Selden provides a valid perspective on the female role and on the marriage market in the community. And soon, Lily is attracted to his platonic vision of the “republic of the spirit” and accepts his view that “the real Lily Bart” has no contact at all with “the trivialities of her little world”; she wishes to participate in what Selden calls “that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part” (142). Lily admires him for his ability to transcend the power of money and to resist the prescriptions of the social codes: “Everything about him accorded with the fastidious element in her taste…. She admired him most of all, perhaps, for being able to convey as distinct a sense of superiority as the richest man she had ever met” (68).

The conversation with Selden also gives Lily a new perspective on the people at the Bellomont party:

How different they had seemed to her a few hours ago! Then they had symbolized what she was gaining, now they stood for what she was giving up. That very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw that they were merely dull in a loud way. Under the glitter of their opportunities she saw the poverty of their achievement. (57)

After scanning “her little world through [Selden’s] retina,” Lily realizes that society people are not only entrapped in a “great gilt cage,” but also their so-called “smart” entertainments are “dreary and trivial” (56, 57). Lily, for a moment, ponders over another way of life:

She closed her eyes an instant, and the vacuous routine of the life she had chosen stretched before her like a long white road without dip or turning: it was true she was to roll over it in a carriage instead of trudging it on
foot, but sometimes the pedestrian enjoys the diversion of a short cut which is denied to those on wheels. (58)

At first sight, it seems that ideals of “the real self,” “beauty,” and “the republic of the spirit” are the alternatives to her dilemmas with living in a market society. The encounter with Selden produces in Lily the clash between transcendent impulses and time-bound realities. The problem is that Selden establishes principles that have nothing to do with her situation. That is, he does not take it into consideration that she cannot share his intellect because she is not as educated as he and that she cannot be financially independent because she does not have a profession as he does.

Lily is right when she asks Selden, “Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?” (74). Debt-ridden Selden admits that he has “nothing to give” her. He is unable to suggest to Lily a practical substitute for what he condemns. Although Selden imagines his role in her quest to “take her beyond—beyond the ugliness, the pettiness, the attrition and corrosion of the soul,” the reader perceives his lack of courage and pragmatism mislead and eventually fail to rescue Lily (163).

As Wharton indicated, Selden is “her negative hero” (qtd. in Lewis 155). He backs off when he witnesses Lily in ugly situations. In spite of his own affair with Bertha, Selden mistakenly guesses Lily’s affair with Trenor and abandons her. Selden again forsakes Lily when Bertha expels her from the Dorsets’ yacht. Richard Poirier comments on Selden's character flaw: "Selden's ways of 'knowing' people are essentially cosmopolitan—by the guesswork, the gossip, the categorizing assumptions that substitute for the slowly accumulated intimacy” (232-33).

Irving Howe regards Selden as one of male characters in Wharton’s fictions who “fail the heroines less from bad faith than from weak imagination, a laziness of spirit” in Wharton’s fictions (15). James Tuttleton, in “Leisure, Wealth and Luxury: Edith Wharton’s Old New York,” thinks of Selden as “a witness to her drama, not a participant” (347). Likewise, in her introduction to the novel, Cynthia Wolff criticizes him for his response to the chronicle of a woman’s life “not with sympathy, but with ‘amusement’” (xxiii). Carol Singley, in Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit, mocks him by playing with his name: “He will ‘sell’ Lily out and that he and his Republic are ‘seldom’ adequate” (81).
Although Lily is skeptical at the ideal of autonomous selfhood, and the concept of the core of Selden’s “republic of the spirit,” she experiences a moment of “throbbing inwardly with rush of thoughts” (67). The narrator directs the reader “inward” to Lily’s thought:

There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive’s gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them; the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, and the free spirit quivered for flight. (67)

As Lily is “throbbing inwardly,” she feels her moods swing between the intoxicating rush of triumphant excitement and despair. The “little black prison-house of fears” is the world of conventional expectation, the mundane world of exchange and the marriage market. In this world, Lily must constantly be on her guard and take advantage of all the opportunities she can find, particularly the chance to catch Gryce for a husband. Instead, she allows herself to spend time with Selden, to be momentarily free, and to breathe the open air of the woods. She recognizes that the two beings within her are in conflict with each other and fears that she can no longer control those “certain closed doors” of her mind “she did not open” (85).

In order to explain the two “beings” in Lily, we can use the context of mythology. In “Peaks and Vales,” James Hillman elaborates on the distinction between spirit and soul. Hillman writes that in every human being, there exists the “Apollonian” spirit, with its desire to make us feel free and open and responsive to our higher selves and the old “Saturn,” who is imprisoned “in paranoid systems of judgment, defensive maneuvers, and melancholic conclusions” (72). Hillman notes that the desire for spiritual transcendence is strong in human beings, but that the cost of seeking one’s soul may come in the form of depression and spiritual malaise. The soul may develop its pathologies.

Robert Stein in “From the Liberation of Women to the Liberation of the Feminine” believes that the “Apollonian deity” dominates the Western consciousness that has no concern for the needs of the individual human soul (43). Stein mentions that spiritual loftiness is a key component of Apollonian essence, and Apollo is ignorant of
the eternal worth of the human individual soul because his concern lies in what transcends the personal, the unchangeable.

Many scholars, however, avoid using the word, “soul,” because of the controversy the word provokes. Hillman traces the loss of the term “soul” to early Christianity when, beginning with the Apostle Paul, the term “spirit” was substituted for “soul.” Hillman points out that at the Council of Constantinople in 869, “[t]he soul lost its domination. At this council, the idea of human nature as devolving from tripartite cosmos of spirit, soul, and body was reduced to a dualism of spirit (or mind) and body (or matter)” (54). The council’s proclamation suggests that Christians who aspire to a higher level of faith and commitment to God should cultivate the spiritual life and not be satisfied with soul-religion.

In *The Imaginary Puritan*, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse address the controversial nature the word “soul.” When they trace the origin of the concept of individuality, they discover the loss of term soul to mind: “Defining the individual as related to the concept of modernity, Locke replaced a Christian soul and an aristocratic body with a mind ‘enclosed’ within a body” (191). In other words, the modern era has lost the term soul, since Locke downgraded the notion of Christian soul into “the stuff of unfounded fears, fancies, and dreams,” which represents a person’s innate irrationality (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 191). Irene de Castillejo in *Knowing Woman* argues that the devaluation of the “irrational feminine” within man results in turning it into “an enemy to be repressed rather than honored as the essential other side of life” (112).

Interestingly, Freud also mentions that his entire life work has been focused on the soul even though the word, soul, *seele*, has been lost in translation into English. Bruno Bettelheim, in *Freud and Man’s Soul*, indicates that this loss occurred when James Strachey eliminated the word soul, translating it as mind in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. According to Bettelheim, Freud uses the word soul to refer to the therapeutic process itself, and claims that the soul is the very object of psychoanalytic treatment. It is the soul that is sick and that requires treatment of its depressions, resentments, paranoids, and melancholias. In effect, Freud says that psychoanalysis is truly about the care of the soul: “Psyche is a
Greek word and its German translation is ‘soul.’ Psychical treatment hence means ‘treatment of the soul’” (Bettelheim 73).

According to Jeffrey Boyd, the human soul abiding in the body functions as “the morally accountable agent in thinking, feeling and willing (decision-making)” (224). It is capable of self-criticism and detached contemplation. As Bernice Martin asserts in “Whose Soul Is It Anyway?,” every individual takes responsibility for his or her own soul because the soul is the “true self,” mirroring personal experiences and moral choices (70).

Based on these notions on the soul, we can say that Lily’s quest to “find the way to [her] self,” is to liberate her “captive” soul from “a little black prison-house of fears” (99). She begins her quest with a fresh look at the society in which she had planned to succeed and calls into question its standards of success. She has presented herself as an object of art, but she has found her success insufficient.

Lily’s search for the truth of her being leads to a long moral journey toward some form of self-esteem that her society friends cannot taint. They never treat Lily as a competent, adult woman, but as a commodity. At every point, her journey through bad risks, misunderstandings, and irresolutions defines a history that she and her friends regard as failures. Even near the very end of the novel, Lily tries to learn to make her own living and imagines herself a millinery shop owner, but she is incapable of matching this dream with a reality.

Finally, she realizes her struggle is useless because “she had been brought up to be ornamental, [and therefore] she could hardly blame herself for failing to serve any practical purpose” (480). Like a “sea anemone torn from [its] rock,” she knows that she is unable to exist alone (295). In her final conversation with Selden, she even expresses her fear of ending her life “thrown out into the rubbish heap” (325). In the midst of much pain and confusion, she performs her “noblest act[s],” as Carol Wershoven calls it, by burning the packet of Bertha’s love letters to Selden and paying a debt to Trenor with her inheritance money on the night of her death (52). Lily ethically responds to critical situations at the risk of running out of all resources left for her own survival.

Lily buys Bertha’s letters from a charwoman and decides to burn them in order to protect Selden and Bertha. Yet she changes her mind when she hears the news of Gryce Percy’s wedding and finds that Bertha is the agent who brings Gryce together
with Evie. Bertha, knowing that Lily has been working toward marrying Gryce, disrupts Lily’s plan to catch Gryce in order to take revenge on Lily for flirting with Selden at the Bellomont party and taking him away from her. Although Bertha casts Lily from society and Lily owns letters that could ruin Bertha, Lily’s last act before taking chloral is to burn the letters that would incriminate her enemy.

Sim Rosedale, “the demonic realist,” as Amy Kaplan calls him, correctly assumes that economic exchange and power politics provide the basis for all relationships in New York society (103). Martha Banta, in her introduction to *The House of Mirth*, also describes Rosedale as “the quintessential outsider, the Jew, the ‘savage’ whose truths are shunned by fastidious insiders who survive by not calling things by their right names” (xxx). Rosedale tries to educate Lily to the fact that in real life what matters is the balance of power demonstrated by “an object that can be computed,” and he advises her to bargain with Bertha in order to reestablish her position in society (268). He points out to Lily that the truth or falsity of stories matters only in novels, “but I’m certain it don’t matter in real life” (268). Lily refuses to use the letters for her own benefit because of her belief “that the essential baseness of the act lay in its freedom from risk” (272).

Many critics agree that Lily’s noble act of withstanding the temptation to blackmail Bertha allows the reader to admire her for “virtue in distress,” in R. F. Brisenden’s terms (29). It seems that Lily’s disgust at the contamination of money and sex is noble and that her refraining from revenge is an act of moral courage. She refuses to marry either Rosedale or Dorset because to do so would involve making use of Bertha’s letters. Mary Nyquist, in “Determining Influences: Resistance and Mentorship in *The House of Mirth* and the Anglo-American Realist Tradition,” indicates that Lily, by refusing to enter into negotiations, protects the bourgeois ideal of marriage for love rather than for money. Lily protects Selden and defends her chastity out of her belief in the ideal of romantic love.

In “Reflecting Vision in *The House of Mirth*,” Roslyn Dixon asserts that Lily’s inner growth makes her take and follow “the morally correct path” by choosing to protect Selden’s reputation (218). Likewise, Margaret McDowell proposes that a theme of the novel is Lily’s “moral victory” over people who represent social graces to her: “This second theme of the book derives from Lily’s gaining a degree of moral or
spiritual victory through suffering defeat in a society that lacks meaning and direction through her returning good for evil” (19-20). In this sense, Lily is both a victor and victim. In “Lilies That Fester: Sentimentality in the Novel,” Robin Beaty argues for Lily’s “moral fineness,” which is so pure that her own newly found honor rather than the social system ironically cause her to fail (263).

On the other hand, some critics do not view Lily’s moral actions as a consequence of the quest for her soul but attribute them to her lack of self-knowledge. Jill Kress defines the self as a “series of staged performance,” seen from Lily’s tableau vivant scene; Lily’s self is fragmented (153). According to Kress, the self does not have a room for the core of “true self,” but it only performs by wearing various masks. In “Divided Selves and the Market Society: Politics and Psychology in The House of Mirth,” Robert Shulman also argues that Lily’s “divided self” is an “example of the power of the market society to divide people internally and to separate them from a community” (10). Lily’s divided aims and her divided self make failure unavoidable. For Lily, failure gives her the feelings of self-disgust, “fearful solitude,” and “inner isolation,” which culminate in her death from an overdose of chloral (155, 63).

Certainly, market society has changed the concept of the self and the behavior codes among people. In his study of the success myth, John Cawelti writes:

> By the end of the nineteenth century, self-help books were dominated by the ethos of salesmanship and boosterism. Personal magnetism, a quality which supposedly enabled a man to influence and dominate others, became one of the major keys to success. (qtd. in Lasch 58)

At the turn of the twentieth century, success manuals prescribes what David Riesman has called “modes of manipulating the self in order to manipulate others” (qtd. in Lears 8). The successful man or woman has “no clear core of self,” but only a set of social masks (8). T. J. Jackson Lears, in No Place of Grace, indicates that as success becomes more dependent on momentary “impression management,” selfhood loses coherence (8). The newer ethic of “other-direction” undermines the solidity of selfhood by presenting the self as an empty vessel to be filled and refilled according to the expectations of others and the needs of the moment. Regarding the ethic of “other-direction,” Christopher Lasch, in The Culture of Narcissism, also captures the modern
man’s uneasiness of being “imprisoned in self-awareness” and his longing for “the lost innocence of spontaneous feelings” (93).

Focusing on people skill results in the degradation of work, and that makes work skill and competence increasingly irrelevant to material success, and so encourages the self to be presented as a commodity. Therefore, being a master of impression and manager of interpersonal relations was becoming, at the turn of the twentieth century, essential into self-advancement. In this sense, Lily also follows the principles of the manual of success. For her, wealth is an absolute necessity to be “dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in” (27). She donates money to Gerty’s working girls’ club and leaves it with “a sense of self-esteem which she naturally mistook for the fruits of altruism,” but it is to impress people (117). The reader notes her need of “Mrs. Bry’s admiration [as] a mirror in which Lily’s self-complacency recovered its lost outline” (118).

In The Basic Fault, Michael Balint notes that narcissists are “desperately dependent on their environment” (55). Based on Balint’s notion, Lily’s dependence on her environment characterizes her narcissism. Narcissists lose their self-esteem when the imaginative environment ceases to function, and they also lose their reason for being.

In Heaven in a Heartless World, Lasch writes:

The work ethic, nurtured in the nuclear family, gives way to an ethic of survival and immediate gratification. As competition centers on survival rather than achievement, the narcissist replaces the seeker of success and status—the increasingly obsolescent personality type that most social scientists mistake for the still dominant type. (xxiv)

Lily’s childhood home and her chaotic upbringing had molded her into what she becomes. Lily recalls her childhood home as a place of constant coming and going rather than a domestic sanctuary:

Ruling the turbulent element called home was the vigorous and determined figure of a mother still young enough to dance her ball-dresses to rags, while the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks. (30)
Her father, Hudson Bart, was downtown all day, making money to support his wife’s extravagances. Lily remembers her father as being “effaced and silent” whereas her mother was a social manager and master of impressions who was “famous for the unlimited effect she produced on limited means; and to the lady and her acquaintances there was something heroic in living as though one were much richer than one’s bankbook denoted” (31). Mrs. Bart cares for artistic effects, including Lily’s beauty, because they are emblematic of the family’s monetary status. Her mother nurtures and indulges Lily’s beauty, expecting that it will snare a wealthy man later.

When her father’s business failed, all that remained were her mother’s resentments and his illness and early death. Every look and act of her mother seemed to say to Lily: “you are sorry for him now—but you will feel differently when you see what he has done to us” (35). After her husband’s death, Mrs. Bart set her mind on promising Lily’s beauty, “watch[ing] it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian,” and keeps telling her daughter “you’ll get it all back—you’ll get it all back, with your face” (30). Lily’s mother believed that Lily’s face was “the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt” (35). In sum, this is “the past out of which her [Lily’s] present had grown” (30).

Lily pretends to reject the alienation of her upbringing and sees herself instead in the gaze of others as mirrors of her own beauty. She turns into a narcissist as Joan Lidoff, in “Another Sleeping Beauty: Narcissism in The House of Mirth,” argues: “[I]nadequate nurturance and support lead to undeveloped self-esteem and a consequent inability to love or to work” so that “the heroine remains fixed in passive dependency and the hungers of the unnurtured childhood state. The mode of primary narcissism remains her dominant emotional style” (536). Many episodes in the novel show her self-consciousness, and her dependence is on others’ opinions and evaluations to feel good about herself.²

For example, when Selden brings into the open that her conventional ambitions are contemptible, she tells him, “I have never recovered my self-respect” (100). His disapproval makes her feel pressured, “as if the eager current of her being had been checked by a sudden impulse which drove it back on itself” (99). As a result, whenever she does what she needs to in order to succeed, she feels “humiliated,” feeling self-conscious of Selden’s presence: “Under the spell of his observation, she felt herself
powerless to exert her usual arts” (100). “Like a frightened child,” Lily feels helpless and punished, or she punishes herself by feeling worthless (99).

She is “oppressed by a sudden conviction of failure” after she allows Gryce to escape and marry Evie (102). The strain of having to keep up a front causes her to “lapse to a deeper self-disgust,” but it is unavoidable for her to feel self-disgust; her self-respect is undermined because she fails to exert her power, to capture her prey, and to achieve the success her mother, her friends, and a part of Lily herself value. As Sam Girgus, in Desire and the Political Unconscious in American Literature, indicates, “the narcissism of perpetual demand” seems to lock Lily “in a prison of the self” (121).

In order not to lose her “narcissistic” self-esteem, Lily makes every effort to maintain a sense of her sumptuous background: “The sense of being of importance among the insignificant was enough to restore to Miss Bart the gratifying consciousness of power” (121). As Lily’s obsessive mirror-gazing reflects, she lives in a world of stage-sets and mirrors where she can see herself only as a reflection in others’ judgments of her or literally in the mirror images. Whenever she wants to know how she feels, she looks into a mirror to find out. When the mirror returns a reassuring message, life seems good to Lily. Because she has been an object of decorative pleasure all her life, the reactions of others are the only mirrors in which she can see herself.

When Selden reacts to her encounter with Trenor by going abroad, “She rose, and walking across the floor stood gazing at herself for a long time in the brightly-lit mirror above the mantelpiece. The lines in her face came out terribly—she looked old; and when a girl looks old to herself, how does she look to other people?” (188). In this scene, the reader sees Lily’s self-reflection in Selden’s reaction, which can be the only mirror at that moment. She senses herself deformed and responds to her image with disgust and self-hatred.

Still, the question of her “being,” which is some pure, essential version of self in contrast to the socialized, narcissistic self, lingers in Lily. Interestingly, Jung also experiences himself as made up of two separate personalities, which he refers to in Memories, Dreams, Reflections: “No. 1 was the son of my parents who goes to school and copes with life as well as I can, while No. 2 was much older, remote from the world of human society, but close to nature and animals, to dreams, and to God” (87). Jung
conceives the No. 2 personality as “having no definable character at all—born, living, dead, everything in one, a total vision of life” (87). As a psychiatrist, he comes to observe that these two personalities are not unique to himself but present in everyone. Much later, renaming these two personalities “the ego” and “the Self,” he argues that maintaining the play and counter-play between them makes the dynamic of personality development.

We can say that Lily has focused on developing the No. 1 personality, which is required to be a successful social climber, but at some point she cannot help being aware of her existence as a “mere pensioner on the splendour which had once seemed to belong to her” (27). Lily feels that living off someone else’s luxury is not much different from living like the “chance lodgers who pass on the stairs” in her aunt’s house (157). There is a price she must pay for the use of “splendour” that does not belong to her.

Her meeting with Gus Trenor in his empty house is to be the most disturbing price she has to pay. In the most intense scene in the novel, Trenor tells Lily that she owes him $9,000 and that he wants her to pay in sexual coin: “I'll tell you what I want: I want to know just where you and I stand. Hang it, the man who pays for the dinner is generally allowed to have a seat at table” (153). Lily is upset by his notion of sexual transaction. She feels that she is polluted and that she is a prostitute because she has “taken what they take and not paid as they pay” (175).

Lily flees to Gerty after her escape from Trenor and attempts explaining to Gerty through an image of “disfigurement” how terrified she is. But she leaves out any detail about what has happened in Trenor’s house:

Can you imagine looking into your glass some morning and seeing a disfigurement—some hideous change that has come to you while you slept? Well, I seem to myself like that—I can’t bear to see myself in my own thoughts—I hate ugliness, you know—I’ve always turned from it—but I can’t explain to you—you wouldn’t understand. (173)

Lily has a serious breakdown. Her narcissistic image shatters when she looks at her “ghastly” image reflected in Gerty’s “blotted and discoloured” looking-glass (279). In other words, her effort to enhance her beauty is all for nothing because all she sees in
the mirror is her disfigured image. It is unbearable for her to see the ugly image in her thoughts.

In *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, Otto Rank notes that narcissistic people react to the hideous images they have to confront either with “fear” or with “revulsion” (73). Rank terms the ugly, “fragmentary and distorted” images “double,” which W. M. Wundt calls “shadow-soul” (301, 82). Rank also says the “double” suddenly appears because the repressed ego comes out as a reflected image. He not only defines double as an embodiment of “suffering soul,” but also reveals people’s refusal of pain through their gestures of slaying a double, or *doppelganger*. A person’s unconscious illusion directs a person to split off from a weak and vulnerable part of the personality. Carl Goldberg, in “The Role of the Mirror in Human Suffering and in Intimacy,” defines the double as “the precise counter to the self, an antidote to its over-invested element of self-love” (515). When Lily confronts the double, she fears and hates her image. For her consciousness, self-destruction may be preferable to sustaining the deformed version of herself.

Lacanian theory of “the mirror stage” suggests how narcissism infantilizes the person. Lacan describes the moment when the child of six to eighteen months triumphantly recognizes its mirror image and identifies with it as an imaginary bodily unity. In other words, the child’s “ego identity” comes through the mis(re)cognition *mecconnaisance* of one’s specular reflection as the “form” (Gestalt) of the ego, in a way that conceals its own lack (qtd. in Dolar 137). Lacan points out that when the child sees itself within a totally unified world, the child rejects reality because of the beguiling effect of mirrors.

Lily loses her sense of power of unity after the incident with Trenor, imagining that an old self stands guard against the newly distorted self. As Lily states to Gerty, “there’s no turning back—your old self rejects you, and shits you out” (174). The reader notes that Lily’s feeling toward herself is never the same as before when the first book of the novel ends: “[i]t would take the glow of passion to weld together the shattered fragments of her self-esteem” (183). In other words, it is time for Lily to bring a new consciousness to birth even though old habits and old ways seem to obstruct the new growth at every point.
In “Athena, Artemis, Aphrodite, and Initiation into the Conscious Feminine,” Jean Bolen illustrates the evolution of consciousness into the new one in terms of a near-death experience or an ecstatic spiritual epiphany:

Similarly, transition periods are times when we are in between our former lives and the next stage of growth. That time in between one realm and the next, one state of consciousness and another, is experienced as “liminal,” from *limen*, a Latin word for the horizontal beam of a doorframe, under which we pass. (220)

In “liminal” times, Bolen says a person is in the process of change and is exceedingly vulnerable because transformation and growth or destruction and regression are equally possible at such times.

Concerning the phenomenon of psychic split, Jung, in “Aion: Phenomenology of the Self,” also discusses the “shadow” elements in personality as those repressed or unlived sides of a person’s potentiality. They remain “primitive” and so can have no place in a civilized society because they are incapable of moral judgment (146). What is remarkable about Jung’s explanation is that the one self and the other “shadow” do not usually communicate by cognition. However, as Jung points out, although the person fails to grasp or know the shadow, the refused and unacceptable characteristics do not vanish; they only hide in the dark corners of human personality.

In the novel, the reader notices Lily is conscious of the power of the shadow in her soul whenever she finds herself being in the hopeless situations of seeking money or a wealthy husband. She feels herself in “dark seas,” called “the mounting tide of indebtedness,” and she wonders “[w]hat wind of folly had driven her out again on those dark seas?” (80). In the psychological sense, waters of the sea usually symbolize the unconscious in human personality. We can assume that “wind of folly” symbolizes the shadow element in Lily. She has not fully grasped the inner phenomenon, and so it frightens her. Whenever pressures from the less understood inner world desist, she feels “enough buoyancy to rise once more above her doubts” (91). Therefore, not only is Lily literally in the “dark seas” of debts, but in the Jungian-metaphoric sense, her “indebtedness” to the shadow-soul which has been in the state of hostage leads Lily to the “dark seas” of her soul.
The shadow’s potentialities for good and evil, though repressed, remain in the unconscious, where they gather energy until they begin to erupt into our conscious lives as the shadow life. Not surprisingly, in the aftershock of Lily’s encounter with Trenor, she detects “a stranger” within her:

I can’t think—I can’t think, she moaned…. She seemed a stranger to herself, or rather they were two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained. (156)

Lily sees “the abhorrent being” that exists as part of her even though she does not know what to make of it. Feminist critics have argued that this “stranger” in Lily, this “abhorrent” self, is the female personality produced by a patriarchal society and a capitalist economy.

In The Madwoman in the Attic, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that patriarchy frames women into two opposing images and shapes each woman’s desire to surrender her personal comfort and her personal desires in order to become a decorative art: “the images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervaded women’s writing to such an extent that few women have definitely ‘killed’ either figure” (34). Clearly, female angel and female monster coexist in Lily.

In spite of the destructive and alien nature of the shadow elements in personality, it is also the shadow that provides a pathway to a person’s soul when he or she is courageous enough to confront the motives, desires, and unlived possibilities of the secret heart. In We: Understanding The Psychology of Romantic Love, Robert Johnson asserts that power within which constantly urges a person to experience the unlived possibilities and values is the life force: “the soul” (65). A person, through the soul, recovers the strength of inner wholeness as well as the ultimate meaning of life. In the Jungian view, being in a situation without solution is the classical beginning of the process of “individuation,” because the unconscious wants that hopeless conflict in order to put ego-consciousness up against the wall—a realization that to whatever one does is wrong, and whichever way one decides will be wrong. Failure and suffering are the process by which one stop being dependent on others for self-esteem—so-called, narcissistic intoxication; they destroy the superiority of the ego, which acts from the
illusion that it has the responsibility for decisions. This courageous act allows one not only to get beyond what one knows, but also to rise to the Self.

In this sense, Lily’s characteristic indecisiveness is not her fatal flaw but her way to remain true to herself even though characters in the novel think of her indecisive tendencies as flighty. The narrator also describes Lily as having a hard exterior, but she is “inwardly as malleable as wax” (55). This description implies that Lily becomes bendable rather than that she lacks inner strength. Lily has been secretly questioning, rejecting the “vocation” that defines a woman’s position in her society: if not marriage, “what else is there?” (9). Thomas Loebel, in “Beyond Her Self,” discusses Lily’s quest for “dis-covering” the self that is similar to the Jungian notion of the process of individuation:

Dis-covering the self is a process that takes place between these two.
The trace of the human in being persecutes the commodified object of identity, and response to the trace of the human (or what I am calling the soul) is the very process of dis-covering the full ontological self, a coming into being of the self. (113)

When Lily finally refuses to “be ready… for the bare chance that [some man] might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life,” she begins to respond to her soul’s need (27). Slavoj Zizek, in Looking Awry, terms it “a symbolic death,” that is, to stop living in the circle of desires (23). Zizek attempts to explain a person’s unreasonable act in the sense of the soul’s “unconditional demand”:

Demand almost always implies a certain dialectical mediation: we demand something, but what we are really aiming at through this demand is something else—sometimes even the very refusal of the demand in its reality. Along with every demand, a question necessarily rises: “I demand this, but what do I really want by it?” (22, 21)

Consciousness demands that the ego die by way of suffering, which is the inevitable price for transformation the ego seeks. Death of the ego, however, does not mean that the ego suddenly disappears. Rather, the ego sacrifices its old world, its old viewpoints, and its old deep-rooted attitudes so that a new set of values come to life and a new synthesis becomes possible. In short, one’s suffering is one’s symbolic death.
The scene of the Mediterranean episode demonstrates how Lily acts upon her “unconditional demand,” even though it does not at first appear so. Bertha invites Lily to the cruise on the Sabrina in order to use her to divert her husband while she has an affair with Ned Silverton. Although Lily is aware of Bertha’s intention, she joins the cruise simply to avoid being alone. She is terrified of isolation because her narcissistic sense of being needs the presence of others. Later, however, by accusing Lily of adultery with her husband, Bertha succeeds in converting a scene of celebrity for Lily into the public staging of a scandal. In response to Bertha’s accusation, Lily neither asks Selden for help nor attempts to defend for herself, but rises and stands “before him [Selden] in a kind of clouded majesty, like some deposed princess moving tranquilly to exile” (229).

This scene is powerful not only because it marks the moment when Lily is expelled from society but, more importantly, because it points the reader toward a profound change in Lily. Her decision to cast herself out of society shows that she surrenders to her soul’s “unconditional demand.” To acquire new growth and new life, Lily has to lose her narcissistic preoccupation with her own beauty, innocence, and purity. Zizek calls it “a symbolic death”:

He [Selden] felt that she had at last arrived at an understanding with herself: had made a pact with her rebellious impulses, and achieved a uniform system of self-government, under which all vagrant tendencies were either held captive or forced into the service of the state. (200)

After the event on the Sabrina, Lily is able to step “outside the great gilt cage” of her social world and to achieve a certain “republic of the spirit” as a system of her self-government (56, 71). From then on, she must relate to the outer world from the strength of inner wholeness rather than search outside for the meaning of her existence. Despite that her self-governance grants her personal autonomy in her inner life, Lily has much difficulty in battling the practicalities of living. She is involved with life’s complexities, including her own dark and ugly sides and her own potentialities.

Her aunt disinherits her when she hears the rumors of Lily’s flirtations with George Dorset. Since Lily cannot remain in her familiar element, she turns to the newly rich. Carrie helps Lily with a job as a guide for newcomers who are willing to pay for social acceptance. Carrie finds Lily a secretarial job to Mrs. Bry, but she is unable to
remain with the Brys. Next, Lily finds a haven with the Gormers, who have much money but care less for status than pleasure. Bertha socially tempts Mrs. Bry and Mrs. Gormer, and Lily finds herself displaced again and takes refuge with Norma Hatch, who lives in a chaos of indolence, a prey to schemers.

The “dark seas” of self-discovery set Lily adrift to the Hotel Emporium of Mrs. Hatch, in which the people “seemed to float together outside the bounds of time and space… [and] night and day flowed into one another in a blur of confused and retarded engagements” (289). To Lily, the lack of distinction in time and space gives the people “no more real existence than the poet’s shades in limbo” (288). The “dark seas” metaphor represents the liberation of ego from the bounds of its known but tiny world into the unbound inner universe of psyche. Living with the newly rich points Lily toward the new consciousness which enables her to see what lies beneath, as opposed to Selden’s warning that “you don’t know where you are!” (294). Lily comes to look at her “former friends” more objectively:

Lily had an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung. For a moment she found a certain amusement in the show, and in her own share of it; the situation had an ease and unconventionality distinctly refreshing after her experience of the irony of conventions. But these flashes of amusement were but brief reactions from the long disgust of her days. Compared with the vast, gilded void of Mrs. Hatch’s existence, the life of Lily’s former friends seemed packed with ordered activities. Even the most irresponsible pretty woman of her acquaintance had her inherited obligations, her conventional benevolences, her share in the working of the great civic machine; and all hung together in the solidarity of these traditional functions. The performance of specific duties would have simplified Miss Bart’s position; but the vague attendance on Mrs. Hatch was not without its perplexities. (290)

Mrs. Hatch is a wealthy divorcee from the Midwest, content to live in the atmosphere of lavish pleasure and disorder. When Lily becomes a counselor to Mrs. Hatch at the Emporium Hotel, she is mesmerized by “the world of the fashionable New York hotel—a world over-heated, over-upholstered, and over-fitted with mechanical appliances for
the gratification of fantastic requirements” (288). Lily’s apprehension of “the irony of conventions” is not an awareness shared by Mrs. Hatch, who creates a lifestyle in which the link between past and present is broken. Although Mrs. Hatch wants to be part of New York society, she is not conscious that she acts against a set of principles of Old New York.

As I noted in the previous chapter, Old New York, a group of elite families, values the finer things of life more than vulgar wealth and pleasure. In contrast, the group of the newly rich has no principles other than those of acquisitiveness and pleasure. Lily feels this atmosphere to be intolerable, and nothing remains for her but her fall into an “unsphered void of social non-existence” and “deeper empoveryishment” (336).

After Lily casts herself out of society, she works at a milliner’s. As time goes on, Lily finds herself unfit to be in the working class, failing to adapt herself to be a hat trimmer. Lily only sees “the fragmentary and distorted image of the world she had lived in, reflected in the mirror of the working-girls’ minds” (301). Her coworkers in the milliner’s shop consider wealthy marriage to be the decisive factor of “success” for a woman. Lily observes that they are “awed only by success—by the gross tangible image of material achievement” that determines a woman’s status in society (301). Clearly, Lily is not destined to belong to this group of working-class women. In the midst of conflicts and exhaustion, she struggles to keep up her energy by drinking tea during the day and taking chloral during the night. The narcotic properties of the chloral bring her into a state of lifelessness.

The day of her death, Lily feels a “sudden pang of profound loneliness,” and she visits Selden’s apartment in search of a cure (317). Her “passionate desire to be understood” leads her to a “strange state of extra-lucidity” (322). Her desire to have Selden “see her wholly” enables her to transcend the convention and open the possibility for communication instead of calculated reactions (323). She confesses to Selden in a weeping voice:

I have tried hard, but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds
that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap—and you don’t know what it’s like in the rubbish heap! (324-25)

Her “consciousness put[s] forth its eager feelers,” but Lily feels Selden’s aloofness (323). She feels “tranced” by Selden, who sees not “the passion of her soul for his,” but “the loose lines of her dress” (326). Selden’s apathetic response to her desperate talk confirms her conviction: “Something in truth lay dead between them—the love she had killed in him and could no longer call to life. But something lived between them also, and leaped up in her life an imperishable flame: it was the love his love had kindled” (326). Lily’s desire to reveal herself and Selden’s inability to interpret her signals form the backbone of their relationship and underline the fact that their minds never fully correspond.

Human love as the power that values another human being does not exist between Lily and Selden. Selden worships Lily’s nature because it is so magnificent, so unworldly, so virginal and so pure. But he neither courts her nor understands her. Selden loves Lily as a projection that flows from his mind rather than as a human being who is imperfect as well as admirable. Evoking a rhetorical question such as, “What else is Selden’s ‘republic of the spirit’ but the idealization of intimacy?,” Bauer estimates Selden’s “republic of the spirit” to be the failure of idealism and intimacy (“Wharton’s ‘Others’” 121).

Lily is too lovely, too perfect, too deep to fit in the ordinary world that forces her to manipulate others through power, money, or looks, and therefore, she has no alternative but to fall prey to poverty, illness, depression, drugs and death. A number of critics view Lily as a victim of her familial and social environment. In The Divided Mind, Peter Conn regards Wharton as a writer of naturalism because of her conviction that “personality depends largely upon circumstance” (183). On the other hand, Singley argues that Lily is more than just the sum total of her biology and environment. Singley penetrates into Wharton’s strategic presentation of the Christianity versus Darwinian science by unraveling the double meaning of Lily’s name:

Here Wharton clearly uses the language of science. But we miss the novel’s spiritual dimension if we do not also realize the sea anemone’s biblical significance. A marine animal with expanded disks and tentacles
and a blossomlike appearance, the anemone is named for the flower that scholars believe is the lily mentioned in Matthew 6.28…. The text of Matthew is a parable addressed to people without faith, exhorting them not to worry about material well-being but to trust in God’s care (“why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not”). The example of the sea anemone on the other hand, demonstrates that survival depends not on God, but on successful negotiation of external factors. These two diametrically opposed views remain in tension throughout The House of Mirth and describe Lily’s dilemma as she struggles to answer the competing calls of Christian surrender and Darwinian survival. (71)

Singley sees beyond the seemingly opposing views of “Christian surrender and Darwinian survival” and uncovers their shared notion that human beings are helpless before the forces of environment. To seek survival from a harsh external environment, human beings cannot help reaching the point of surrender to a higher being. In other words, God tests human beings through suffering in order to initiate them on a journey of discovery that leads to a new life.

This is true for Lily. The journey is over when she surrenders and dies. It is also possible to suggest that death represents the other face of life. Freed from literalism, death is not the end but a symbol of profound change, of transformation. The liberation of the ego from the physical makes it possible to enter into the realm of the psyche, to meet, and join with the soul, and to consent to give up the tiny world of the ego to live in the universe of the psyche. Since primordial times, people have conceived of death as freedom from the limited physical realm of time and space into the unlimited and measureless universe of spirit and eternity.

On the night of her death, before going to bed, Lily follows a moral injunction and finishes her last duty by paying off her debt to Trenor with her last ten thousand dollars. Drifting into the dream state, she is consoled by the feeling that “[t]o-morrow would not be so difficult after all; she felt sure that she would have the strength to meet it” and sinks from “the soft approach of passiveness” into “complete subjugation” (340).

Wharton wrote in her memoir of the opening night of the play, The House of Mirth in New York City. William Dean Howells accompanied her to the Savoy
Theater. Wharton remembered that as the two authors left, Howells summed up the reason for the play’s failure: “‘Yes—what the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending’” (BG 147). Jerome Loving comments that the adaptation of the novel to the play is also “foredoomed” because of the American longing for endless second chances or reawakening to life (113). Wharton knew that her audience was sorry for Lily’s death. But at the same time, Wharton noted that her readers might have missed out on the promises Lily has achieved at the end of the novel.

Lily’s death turns out to be only sleep. She has worked her way through her tasks, each one progressively a more complex and leading to a more thoroughgoing self-understanding. In her hallucinations from the effects of choral, she feels that “[s]he had been unhappy, and now she was happy—she had felt herself alone, and now the sense of loneliness had vanished” (340). Suddenly feeling Nettie Struther’s baby—who has been named in her honor—on her arm, Lily holds her as if “the child entered into her and became a part of herself” (333).

Considering the fact that the baby is the only new life created in the novel, this passage may imply that Lily is finally granted a new life as a new creature in a new house, “not made with hands, eternal in heavens,” (2Corinthians 5:1). Earlier in the day, Lily realizes that no “one spot of earth” is dear to her (336). Surely now she claims her heavenly dwelling, far from the “shabby” boarding-house, or the “miserable” house of mirth; her individual existence “broaden[s] and deepen[s]” once she receives the image of the home within (342, 161).

The baby Lily holds in her sleep of death embodies pleasure or joy. When a woman finally reaches her full development, she gives birth to an element of pleasure, joy, or ecstasy. In the next chapter, we will investigate a group of people, represented as hotel-dwellers, who form the new class of upstarts who invade New York society: wealthy Americans from the Midwest and successful immigrants such as Jews. Their push as social climbers precipitates Lily’s fall.

In The Custom of the Country (1913), Wharton portrays Undine Spragg from the Midwest living at Stentorian Hotel in New York. The names “Stentorian” and “Emporium” connote a loud urban life based on the values of the marketplace. Undine, who begins her career as a hotel-dweller, does not know what Lily knows such as leisure-class manners, costume, and custom. The next chapter will explore what it takes
for Undine not only to enter high society through a prestigious marriage, but also to thrive in it. Certainly, she will need more than her red-haired beauty and her father’s money.
NOTES

1. Bentley also argues in *The Ethnography of Manners*: “[R]ather than secure her real identity and value, the staged appearance subjects Lily to the speculations of a group of wealthy men…. Lily is eventually caught and framed, as it were, by the forces of social speculation, which are ultimately fatal” (184). Although this scene may mark the instance of Lily’s publicity, Kress’s view of Lily’s disguised identity in the tableau vivant scene can be still debatable. It seems that Lily has to wear a mask to express “the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of the eternal harmony of which he beauty was a part,” as Selden observes (142). Selden has the “responsive fancy” Wharton says, and so he can read the tableau properly, noting the way they play with the “boundary world between fact and imagination,” he understands the complexities of the identification (140). Lily also understands that the unanimous “Oh!” of the spectators has been called forth “by herself, and not the picture she impersonated” (141, 143). Lily represents the figure of Sir Joshua Reynolds’ Mrs. Lloyd, in a draped gown that reveals ‘long dryad-like curves that swept upwards from her poised foot to her lifted arm’ (142). Selden sees Lily as “a captured dryad” and reflects “that it was the same streak of sylvan freedom in her nature that lent such savour to her artificiality” (13). To the Greeks, dryads were female spirits who lived within trees, wielding axes to protect them. Lily is not only imitating the painting, however, but also “banishing” it through her seamless skill at making it similar to what she is (142). In her identification with it, she creates something wholly other than the original by resisting the pressures of money and sex.

2. According to Freud, a child invents an illusion of security by setting up an ego ideal when he or she feels himself or herself to be threatened or under attack. The ego splits itself and invents an ideal of itself, which will allow the ego to have a sense of power. Freud argues that, in order for children to develop normally, they must resolve the oedipal crisis by rejecting the mother and identifying with the father, thereby internalizing the symbolic order which structures their consciousness. For the relation between the ego ideal and the actual ego, Shirley Sugarman, in *Sin and Madness*, explains as follows: “This ego ideal ‘deems itself the possessor of all perfections’ and watches the ego and measures it according to its values and standards (130). Thus, the formation of an ideal would be the condition of repression of the ego because the infant measures its actual ego by the ego ideal. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud elaborates on the necessity of the ego ideal in a person and narcissistic tendency:

   We have said that it is the heir to the original narcissism in which the childish ego enjoyed self-sufficiency; it gradually gathers up from the influences of the environment the demands which that environment makes upon the ego and which the ego cannot always rise to; so that a man, when he cannot be satisfied with his ego itself, may nevertheless be able to find satisfaction in the ego ideal which has been differentiated out of the ego. (13)
A narcissistic person is, however, ambivalent toward his or her ego because something in a narcissistic person, which does not measure up to the ego ideal, resists exclusive self-love. The narcissistic preoccupation with the self lies not in self-love, but in underlying feelings of unworthiness and rejection and the need to feel worthy and lovable. Disruption of early narcissistic security turns a person into permanently divided selves. Janine Chasseguet-Smirget, in *The Ego-Ideal: A Psychoanalytic Essay on the Malady of the Ideal*, notes that the individual loses a “narcissistic omnipotence from which he is henceforth divided by a gulf that he will spend the rest of his life trying to bridge” (6). Lily’s case of narcissism seems to be problematic. As her father’s authority weakens in her family structure, the paternal function, “pacifying law, the Name-of-the-Father” declines and results in the disintegration of the ego ideal in Lily (Zizek 99). That does not mean she grows without having an ego ideal. It encourages the development of a harsh and punitive “maternal” superego, which is “irrational” (99).

In contrast to paternal ego ideal, Zizek emphasizes the ferocity of maternal superego, “impos[ing] [ego] and punish[ing] ‘social failure’ in a far more cruel and severe way, through an unbearable and self-destructive anxiety” (103). Lily has to live with triad--ego, paternal ego ideal, and maternal superego--in herself, without knowing which one she needs to internalize or identify herself with. That is how Lily has turned out to be a “pathological narcissist” in Lasch’s terms (176). In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch indicates it as pathological because of its uncontrollable fear of punishment for failure.

3. Susan Buck-Morss also indicates that throughout the nineteenth century, doctors used to prescribe anesthetics, usually opium, as sleeping aids for insomnia and tranquilizers for the insane. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that “the Greek word narcosis, or numbness” is the etymological root shared by the word “narcissism” (McLuhan 63).

At the end of the Narcissus myth, the gods transformed Narcissus’ body into a flower, the narcissus, which has narcotic properties. Sugarman stresses that the destructive properties of the narcissus has been proved: “The lower is used as a balm, but is apt to give headaches… but it is more than a narcotic, it is… poisonous” (20). Therefore, we can say that narcissism that Lily develops as an adult functions as an anesthetizing tactic against her unbearable shame and self-hatred.
CHAPTER THREE
No Limit: Energetic Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country

In The Custom of the Country (1913), Undine Spragg, as an invader into New York society, represents a new breed and new money. Undine embodies characteristics such as strength, determination, and resiliency as she marries her way up the social ladder, discards her husbands, and abandons her child. In contrast to Lily Bart in The House of Mirth who also seeks a husband, but fails to find one, Undine is quite successful after having survived three marriages and one affair. At the end of the novel, Undine returns to her first husband, Elmer Moffatt, who has become “the billionaire Railroad King,” one of the six richest men in the world (832). Undine is an emblem of American prosperity and moral degeneration in the early twentieth century.

Wharton uses Undine’s “pioneer blood” in order to present her as a paragon of the modern American at the turn of the twentieth century (482). That Undine is a character from Apex City, a town in the Midwest, in a state renowned for its tornadoes, denotes her unchecked and destructive energy (527). Cynthia Wolff views The Custom of the Country as a story about vitality and notes Undine’s “psychic energy—power, assertion, drive, ambition” (232). Shari Benstock agrees with Wolff that Wharton’s “difficulties with The Custom of the Country had always turned on the question of energy” (283). Benstock points out the irony that, as she completed the novel, Wharton was “fatigued almost to illness,” yet Undine is one of her most energetic characters (283). Certainly, newcomers in New York society like Undine burst with vitality and initiative compared with lethargic members of Old New York. Undine typifies the newcomer who presses forward in spite of temporary setbacks or defeats. Throughout the novel, Undine battles her way upward by breaking the codes, which allows her to master an economic and social system designed to oppress her.

Undine, a daughter of an entrepreneur of the American Midwest, aspires to the world that can give her wealth, admiration, and status. She convinces her parents to move to New York from the Midwest to advance her marital career. From the first, Undine understands that the way for a woman to succeed is through marriage to a prominent, wealthy man because the marriage assures the wife of the social as well as
financial position of her husband. As Robert Grant remarks, she is “detached from every established canon of conduct,” refusing to play the roles of wife and mother (qtd. in Dupree 9). Although Undine’s cold and calculating behavior seems to be ruthless and contemptible, she has no choice if she wants to succeed because her society rewards the unemotional and the detached rather than the empathetic and the sentimental.

Furthermore, Undine acts as an enemy of the feminine nature, denigrating the feminine ideal, and it seems that Wharton’s creation of Undine is to undermine men’s ability to define women. This chapter is a study of the character of Undine as a new breed of American woman and seeks to discover where the source of her boundless energy lies. Character analysis of Undine will also provide the lens for assessing modern New York as it is as well as the modern American character.

In The Custom of the Country, Wharton covers a ten-year period, showing New York society in the midst of a transformation, which includes handing over authority and power from Old New York elites to the newly rich. As Wolff indicates, the newcomers in the novel such as Undine Spragg, the Driscolls, and Elmer Moffatt “are the wave of the future” in New York society, which is based on the fortunes of the wealthiest industrialists in the world (233).

In Backgrounds of American Literary Thought, Rod W. Horton has labeled them “the captains of industry” or the “lords of finance” who used “their youthful aggressiveness” in order to hoard “fantastic profits” after the Civil War (146). Horton describes the industrialists as “shrewd and animally clever,” as stalkers of opportunity, and as men with “the adventurous spirit of the pioneers” (147). They travel the globe, plundering “the castles of the rich” (Wolff 233). These so-called “robber barons” adopted a new “philosophy of driving ambition, lust for power, animal cunning, and the sort of perverted self-reliance that leads one to trample his neighbors,” leaving behind the “high seriousness” and “business morality” that had “stressed honesty and absence of greed in business relationships” (Horton 147). When it comes to this new American vigor, Old New York is no match for the new-monied group.

In her memoir, A Backward Glance, Wharton argues that their influx did not affect manners and customs of Old New York because “the dearest ambition of the newcomers was to assimilate existing traditions” (6). The group of the newly rich
differs from the one that consists of Wharton’s parents and their friends and relatives who value “education and good manners, and scrupulous probity in business and private affairs” (BG 21). Wharton was born into one of the socially prominent New York families even though she claims it to have been middles class. Middle-class in the period would have included artisans and retailers, but certainly her family was not in that class. Rather, her family’s ancestors were “purely middle class… merchants, bankers, and lawyers” (BG 10-11).

In “A Little Girl’s New York,” she recollects her girlhood in one of the brownstone houses that lined Fifth Avenue: “The lives led behind the brownstone fronts were, with few exceptions, as monotonous as their architecture” (358). The Brownstone is the Old New York’s elite housing. Furthermore, she comments on its architectural effect on the constraining life of its residents: “I have often sighed, in looking back at my childhood, to think how pitiful a provision was made for the life of the imagination behind those uniform brownstone facades…. Beauty, passion, and danger were automatically excluded” (360).

On the other hand, Wharton portrays the newly rich as hotel-dwellers who seem externally to flourish, but internally they are insensitive to the inherited values of Old New York which they believe they are emulating. In other words, they fail to recognize that they are members of a “phantom ‘society’” because the fact of living in a hotel emphasizes that they lack the impressive family genealogy (626). They have neither real identity nor real social position. Such hotel-dwellers wrongly view high society life as being based on personal comfort and self-indulgence, whereas an aristocratic home demands respect for tradition and self-denial. It seems that the newcomers are not fully aware of the artificiality of the hotel environment and of its effect on them.

The lavish disorder of the Emporium Hotel in The House of Mirth vividly contrasts to the “glacial neatness” of Julia Peniston’s Fifth Avenue brownstone (38). Ralph Marvell in The Custom of the Country, a scion of Old New York, also notes the architectural contrast between the new mansions and his own “symmetrical old red house-front,” which features the movement in society from one of unostentatious refinement to one of overabundance and display (492). Ralph thinks, a “steel shell” built by business on Wall Street with “social trimmings hastily added in Fifth Avenue,” contrasts with the “small, cautious, middle-class… ideals of aboriginal New York”
He knows that the display is ornamental, a hollow layer made to cover the emptiness beneath newcomers’ lack of substance, “a muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility” (493).

As Old New York slowly fades, Ralph becomes more aware of its values and qualities. While he feels it is “vanishing,” he respects “the ideals of aboriginal New York,” which are

singly coherent and respectable as contrasted with the chaos of indiscriminate appetites which made up the modern tendencies. He too had wanted to be “modern,” had revolted… against the restrictions and exclusions of the old code; and it must have been by one of the ironic reversions of heredity that, at this precise point, he began to see what there was to be said on the other side—his side, as he now felt it to be. (493-94)

Old New York eventually falls before the path of the invaders when its aristocrats prove to be too ineffectual and too weak to confront the powerful group of the newly rich. Horton continues to document that the newly rich succeeded in invading the New York society with their “clever infiltration tactics in the form of lively parties, stentorian material display, and wide-open Lucullan banquets” (193). The newly rich moved in, and within a decade, the members of the fashionable set in New York had increased from an exclusive 400 to a showy 4000.

Concerning this era of “conspicuous waste,” Horton records: “It was nothing for a social luminary to spend a quarter of a million dollars annually for parties alone,” and one notorious ball of James Hazen Hyde in 1899, cost one hundred thousand dollars for a single evening (193). Wharton’s heroine Undine resides in the Hotel Stentorian in New York City. The hotel offers its tenants a group of “Looey suites”—rooms decorated with gilded furniture, floral carpets, pink damask wall hangings, and portraits of Marie Antoinette (672). This emerging world of the new materialists is, as Mary Ellen Gibson describes it, “promiscuous and incoherent,” which contrasts with the fastidiousness of Old New York (63).

The vitality and money of newcomers tempt Old New Yorkers who does not have the strength to control them, nor the energy to resist them. In the novel, the
Marvells and the Dagonets represent Old New York. They are conservative, refined, unostentatious, but enervated, devitalized as well. Early in the novel, during her first visit to Ralph’s sister, Laura Fairford’s home, Undine discovers that “[t]he house, to begin with, was small and rather shabby” (466). Disappointed at the Fairfords’ dinner, Undine thinks it “dull of Mrs. Fairford not to have picked up something newer” from “the hints in the Sunday papers”:

There was no gilding, no lavish diffusion of light: the room they sat in after dinner, with its green-shaded lamps making faint pools of brightness, and its rows of books from floor to ceiling, reminded Undine of the old circulating library at Apex, before the new marble building was put up. Then, instead of a gas-log, or a polished grate with electric bulbs behind ruby glass, there was an old-fashioned wood-fire, like pictures of ‘Back to the farm for Christmas’; and when the logs fell forward Mrs. Fairford or her brother had to jump up to push them in place, and the ashes scattered over the hearth untidily. (466)

The sober decorum of the Fairfords’ home contrasts with the showy excesses of the fashionable New York hotel to which Undine becomes accustomed, “a world over-heated, over-upholstered, and over-fitted with mechanical appliances for the gratification of fantastic requirements,” as Lily depicts in The House of Mirth (288). At Fairford’s home, Undine expects the artificial light and the artificial fire, which are light without heat and the false fire, but “all was blurred and puzzling to the girl in this world of half-lights, half-tones, eliminations and abbreviations; and she felt a violent longing to brush away the cobwebs and assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene” (469).

The change in sense-perception by modern technological development causes Undine’s frustration at Fairford’s home. The key word for this development is phantasmagoria. Susan Buck-Morss explains the term, originated in England in 1802, as “an exhibition of optical illusions produced by magic lanterns” (22). It describes an appearance of reality that tricks the senses through technical manipulation. Buck-Morss indicates that in the bourgeois interiors of the nineteenth century, furnishings provide a phantasmagoria of textures, tones, and sensual pleasure that immersed the home-dweller in a privatized fantasy world that functioned as a protective shield for sense and
sensibilities. Undoubtedly, Undine feels strange at Fairford’s home with its natural furnishings because she has exposed her sensorium to its phantasmagoric effects as a dweller in a hotel, which is a technologically (or artificially) altered environment.

In terms of handling sensory impressions, Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* notes that the function of consciousness is to protect the organism against stimuli—“excessive energies”—from the external world: “For a living organism, protecting against stimuli is an almost more important function than the reception of stimuli: the protective shield is equipped with its own store of energy… [operating] against the effects of the excessive energies at work in the external world…” (qtd. in Benjamin 115). The nervous system is not contained within the body’s limits. The circuit from sense-perception to motor response begins and ends in the world. Freud argues that the sensory circuit must include the external world for its completion as the source of stimuli and the arena for motor response. He thinks that the brain is not an anatomically isolable part of body, but a part of a system that passes through the person and his or her environment.

Walter Benjamin’s understanding of modern experience is neurological, too. He focuses it on shock. He notes that in industrial production, which is no less than modern warfare, in street crowds and erotic encounters, in amusement parks and gambling casinos, shock is the essence of modern experience. Modern environment also includes urbanization, the growth of office work, and women’s increased participation in society. T. J. Jackson Lears in *No Place of Grace* draws attention to the “feelings of unreality” that urbanization and technological development evoked at the turn of the twentieth century:

Freed from the drudgery of farm life, they were also increasingly cut off from the hard, resistant reality of things…. Yet this ease of life had not produced healthy people; on the contrary, the most comfortable people were also the most anxious, the most likely to fall victim to our now universal disorder, nervous prostration. (6-7)

Lears indicates that the modern people pay the price in the form of nervous strains for being liberated from the physical labors. In *Degeneration*, Max Nordau also describes
the impact of technological advance on everyday experience and the fast pace of modern life:

Every line we read or write, every human face we see, every conversation we carry on, every scene we perceive through the window of the flying express, sets in activity our sensory nerves and our brain centers. Even the little shocks of railway travelling, not perceived by consciousness, the perceptual noises and the various sights in the streets of a large town, our suspense pending the sequel of progressing events, the constant expectation of the newspaper, of the postman, of visitors, cost our brain wear and tear. (39)

Nordau illustrates that it is too much for the conscious to register the fast-moving pace of modern life in city. S. Weir Mitchell, a contemporary of Wharton and of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, argued that competitive businessmen and socially active women were unfortunate products of a modernizing America because they were at risk of overtaxing their supply of nervous energy. In The Stress of Life, Hans Selye also defines “stress syndrome” as a “disease of adaptation,” that is, an inability of the organism to meet a demand made on it with adequate adaptive reactions (307). George Miller Beard coined the term Neurasthenia in 1869 in American Nervousness as a pathological phenomenon. Neurasthenia is the disintegration of the capacity for experience, as in Benjamin’s account of shock. In Shattered Nerves, Janet Oppenheim explains its disorder caused by “excess of stimulation” and the “incapacity to react to same” (120).

In Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin writes: “The threat from these energies is one of shocks. The more readily consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely they are to have a traumatic effect” (115). Under conditions of modern shock on a daily basis, response to stimuli without thinking has become necessary for survival. Benjamin uses the Freudian hypothesis that consciousness wards off shock by preventing it from penetrating deep enough to leave a permanent trace on memory. Therefore, shock causes the “crisis in perception” because packed experiences within a short time overstimulate the organism and numb it in order to register nothing (147). Circumscribing the experience of shock, Charles Baudelaire calls this “a kaleidoscope
equipped with consciousness,” which is incapable of retaining its impress as memory (qtd. in Benjamin 132).

Based on Benjamin’s understanding of mass modern society, Buck-Morss calls the simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness “the cognitive system of synaesthetics” (18). Buck-Morss traces the etymological meaning of the word, aesthetics, which is the ancient Greek word, aisthitikos, “perceptive by feeling” (qtd. in Buck-Morss 6). She terms phantasmagoria a “technoaesthetics” (22). She also discovers that this aesthetic system of sense-consciousness has become “anaesthetic” in the modern era.

Buck-Morss documents that whereas the body’s self-anaesthetizing defenses are involuntary, these involve the manipulation of the synaesthetic system in the narcotic forms of coffee, tobacco, tea, and spirits. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, anaesthetizing methods include drugs and therapeutic practices, from opium, ether, and cocaine to hypnosis, hydrotherapy, and electric shock:

> Being “cheated out of experience” has become the general state, as the synaesthetic system is marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. As a result, the system reverses its role. Its goal is to numb the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory. (18)

For example, Lily in The House of Mirth lives on past memories. At the beginning of the novel, the reader sees Lily’s losses at gambling lead her to “a whole train of association” in which she remembers her parents and her early education (30). The night she dies, she puts all the dresses out and brings back the memories of occasions for which she wore those dresses. Lily’s “synaesthetic system” has not developed to evade the excessive energies in “new” New York.

On the other hand, Undine’s attitude toward material goods differs from Lily’s, and this contrast reveals that Undine has more control over the external environment. Undine never gives meaning to material things even though she wants to be “able to buy everything she wanted” (685). Once she acquires décor and objects, she abandons them,
gives them away, sells them, or alters them. For instance, Undine resets the wedding ring and necklace that are the Marvell family heirlooms. By removing these jewels from their settings, she not only destroys their identity but also devalues the memory preserved in the Marvell family heirlooms. The destruction of these jewels inflicts a “wound” on Ralph (587). Likewise, she forces her third husband Raymond de Chelles to sell the Boucher tapestries that hang at Saint Desert, the country mansion, in order to buy her more dresses. She could not care less about keeping the tapestries in the context that gives them meaning.

As Beverly Voloshin indicates, what stimulates desire is the characteristics of commodities, “newness, freshness, beauty, stylishness,” rather than the objects themselves (98). Undine remains addicted to new things and new experiences by refusing to stay in one place and dwelling on one experience. She owns mansions, wears fabulous jewels and dresses, and travels constantly to the point where her desire for material goods threatens to bankrupt her father as well as her husbands. She stays stimulated and energetic by desiring and acquiring material objects and new experiences which comprise her external world: “She wants, passionately and persistently, two things which she believed should subsist together in any well-ordered life: amusement and respectability” (678).

Whether she resides in the Hotel Stentorian in New York, or in the Hotel Nouveau Luxe in Paris, Undine finds the atmosphere of these establishments congenial and enjoys “unbounded material power… devised for the delusion of its leisure” (626). Undine is so naturally suited to the hotel environment that whenever she enters the luxurious rooms of the Nouveau Luxe, her spirits immediately revive “like plants in water” (814). In Paris, Undine thrives among the thronged motors, the brilliant shops, the novelty and daring of the women’s dresses, the piled-up colours of the ambulant flower-carts, the appetizing expanse of the fruiterers’ windows… all the surface-sparkle and variety of the inexhaustible streets of Paris. (632)

That is why Undine feels out of her element in a French chateau that is pastoral and isolated. During her residence at Saint Desert, she reminisces on her life at the Hotel
Stentorian and dreams of escaping to Paris to enjoy the excitement, the elegance of the Hotel Nouveau Luxe and its fantastic public spectacle.

If we interpret Undine’s fascination with Paris’ streets and sumptuous hotels, its environment has the effect of anaesthetizing the organism through flooding the senses. Her control of environmental stimuli enables her synaesthetic system to be overstimulated and anaesthetized immediately. Buck-Morss summarizes Benjamin’s observation of the spread of “phantasmagoric” forms to the public sphere and notes altered consciousness on a collective rather than on an individual level:

- the Paris shopping arcades, where the rows of shop windows created a phantasmagoria of commodities on display; panoramas and dioramas that engulfed the viewer in a simulated total environment-in-miniature,
- and the World Fairs, which expanded this phantasmagoric principle to areas the size of small cities. (22)

Undine’s second husband Ralph penetrates into her craving for a public appearance and phantasmagoric effect on her sense-consciousness: “It was admiration, not love, that she wanted…. And her conception of enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity—the band, the banners, the crowd, the close contact of covetous impulses, and the sense of walking among them in cool security” (593). Her hunger to be in the spotlight is insatiable because she wants unspecific “everything,” more accurately, the world of public spectacle formed by opera and theatre boxes, lavish balls, extravagant dinners, yachting, jewels, gowns, and exhibitions.

Undine’s desire to be at the center of public display makes her live before the mirror. She has long practiced how to best present her physical self to an audience. Her passion for the mirror comes from enjoying “the image of her own charm mirrored in the general admiration” (549). Even in times of constraint, she looks into her mirrored reflection in order to draw “fresh hope from the sight of her beauty” (608). Candace Waid notes that Undine is “conscious of herself as spectacle” even when alone (136). Whenever she walks through a room, she stops to look at her own reflection in a mirror and, before the mirror, positions and repositions herself to alter the contours of her surface. As Undine parades before the mirror, Wharton describes her concern:

Only one fact disturbed her: there was a hint of too much fulness in the curves of the neck and in the spring of her hips. She was tall enough to
carry off a little extra weight, but excessive slimness was the fashion, and she shuddered at the thought that she might some day deviate from the perpendicular. (460)

Early in the novel, the reader watches her try on dress after dress, dragging “the tall pier-glass forward,” “rummaging in a drawer for fan and gloves,” and sweeping “to a seat before the mirror with the air of a lady arriving at an evening party” (459). She already shows this habit as a child in Apex where she dismisses “the diversions of her playmates,” and instead delights in dressing up “in her mother’s Sunday skirt [to] ‘play lady’ before the wardrobe mirror” (459). This practice outlasts her childhood as “[s]he still practised the same secret pantomime, gliding in, settling her skirts, swaying her fan, moving her lips in soundless talk and laughter” (459). Jenijoy La Belle in Herself Beheld draws on the Lacanian concept that the image in a gigantic, ornate hotel mirror creates identity for Undine who defines her personhood in the image of the mirrored double (62).

The reader observes that the “image of herself in other minds” is “her only notion of self-seeing” because she lacks any sense of self-reflection (710). To establish this trait, Wharton ironically reverses the traditional image of mirrors as reflecting the inner self. Wharton shows that, for Undine, a mirror operates strictly in its literal way: it reflects only her external self, a self that never truly grows beyond the “joy of dramatizing her beauty” (459). She expects people to comment on her appearance, she herself constantly observes her reflection in mirrors, and, indeed, she even sees herself in other objects: the Boucher tapestries, for example, become “mirrors reflecting her own image” (795). She is someone who goes to others in order to see herself. She is always willing to objectify herself.

Whereas the “self-reflection” takes a sensitive human being as its subject matter, in Undine’s case, we see the “second consciousness” replace the self-reflective mode. In “Photography and the ‘Second Consciousness,’” Ernst Junger explains the development of “second consciousness,” which parallels the development of technology (207). In his view, the technological world brings forth a “second nature,” and in the same way he thinks of photography as a sign of the emergence of a colder, instrumental “second consciousness.” Junger praises the camera as a new eye devoid of feeling and therefore able to contemplate the “horror of modern world” with detachment (207).
Junger regards photography both as a shield for the sentiments and as an extension of the human sense. Junger calls it an “aggressive visual weapon” because it requires the universe to open itself up to penetration by the human sensory apparatus (207).

Although Undine is socially active, she does not fall victim of sense and sensory impressions such as unruly feelings, inconvenient affections, and past memory. Indifferent to feeling, Undine is well-equipped for success in modern society. While Lily in The House of Mirth has a hard exterior but is “inwardly as malleable as wax” (55), Undine is “malleable outwardly” but inwardly “insensible to the touch of the heart” (593). Ralph’s earlier perception of Undine as “a creature of skin-deep reactions” tells us who Undine is exactly (594). The more she withdraws from his touch, the more her coolness allures him:

She had never known any repugnance of his tenderness, but such response as it evoked was remote and Ariel-like, suggesting, from the first, not so much the recoil of ignorance as the coolness of the element from which she took her name. (545)

Ralph imagines his wife as a water nymph from mythology. According to Micha Lindemans, undines are female water-spirits who like to associate with humans by joining in their dances and merry-making in German folklore.

On the other hand, this coolness allows Undine to be controlled and calculating: “A cool spirit within her seemed to watch over and regulate her sensations, and leave her capable of measuring the intensity of those she provoked” (640). Cold-bloodedness is a trait of water-spirits and Wharton develops this metaphor to emphasize Undine’s cool nerve, or in Junger’s term, “second consciousness,” in which lies the source of her “cool passions” (Waid 138). Undine reflects: “It was wonderful how cool she felt—how easily she could slip out of his grasp! Any man could be managed like a child if he were really in love with one” (640).

For Undine, love means power over other, a type of “possessorship” (510). She tells herself that the “part” of a young woman “very much in love, and a little confused and subdued by the newness and intensity of the sentiment” was “not hard to play, for she was in love, of course” (506). Wharton makes it clear that Undine is playing a role
in the sense that she feels none of this intensity of emotion toward Ralph. Undine had remained dispassionate throughout her marriage to Ralph.

As many feminist critics discern, Wharton portrays Undine as an asexual being. There is no sexual passion or even the sentiment of sex in Undine. However, Undine is well aware of a man’s libido as a factor to consider in order to form a more socially and financially rewarding partnership through the practice of sex. Therefore, she uses sex without any physical or emotional dependency. Excitement or the pleasure they might bring is not her concern at all.

Mary Schriber argues that “Undine’s absolute indifference [to sex] deconstructs the culture’s frame of sexual reference, rendering it meaningless,” because it subverts the patriarchal standard that says “a woman’s sexuality is her pearl beyond price” (177). Ellen Dupree also claims that the novel is “profoundly feminist” and that Undine exposes women’s oppression in marriage by showing how far women need to go to overcome them (5). Undine leaves behind the legacy of the sentimental novels in which passionate heroines are dominant. She is more than likely what Patricia Spacks calls the “free woman.” In “Free Woman,” Spacks says, “In the twentieth century, social possibilities are greater and the image of the free woman —often promiscuous, often intellectual, priding herself on being emotionally undemanding…—has been established in fiction by men and women alike” (96).

Undine marries Ralph without love, and soon realizes that by marrying into the Marvells, she throws in her lot with the “exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous” (572). Therefore, she must move on, and begins to appraise Peter Van Degen, a rich New Yorker, with cool detachment. Her pregnancy hinders her from enjoying social life in New York, and after the birth of her son, Paul, she fakes hysteria in order to be prescribed a therapeutic trip to Paris, where she runs into Van Degen and lives with him.

Van Degen eventually abandons her, however, even though he originally expects her to be his mistress. Her behavior toward Ralph scares him off when he discovers her refusal to go back to Ralph, who falls severely ill while she is in Paris. She betrays her heartlessness even to the amoral Van Degen. He comes to the conclusion that she would treat him exactly the same way. When it comes to her
response to Van Degen’s decision, she neither bears a grudge against him nor allows passion or self-blame to control her. Instead, she reassesses her position and calculates a new move based on “the business shrewdness which was never quite dormant in her” (678). Blake Nevius concedes to Undine “the practical advantage of being completely amoral, unsentimental, and without conscience. With society constituted as it is, she holds all the cards” (107-08).

Undine, unhindered by inherited traditions and tastes, suffers much less from the clash of values than do the Old New Yorkers. She enjoys the pleasures of the new society, where money rules over everything. On the other hand, Ralph, a member of the old guard in New York, struggles with “the social disintegration” taking place in his society (493). In the past, tradition and family determine the social status, but money and the accumulation of material goods do now. Ralph declares traditional Old New York families like his own to be a species endangered by an “invading race” (493). He reflects that the “invading race” is taking over his “race” through intermarriage: “The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders while the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box. It ought all to have been transacted on the Stock Exchange” (497).\footnote{Ralph was attending Harvard and Oxford, traveling through Europe, and reading law while Undine was hanging on the fence in Apex City with her friend, Indiana Frusk. His education and background encourage his belief in art as an escape from the problems of everyday reality. He attempts to search for a meaning as an aspirant poet-critic against the social change. He believes that through the creation of an art world, the artist will discover immortal truth.

Wharton uses a change of scenery from Italy to Switzerland in order to emphasize his belief in his artistic ability as dependent on the strength of private vision, which goes against the trend of mass society: “In the quiet place with the green water-fall Ralph’s vision might have kept faith with him: but how could he hope to surprise it in the mid-summer crowds of St. Mortiz?” (548). Enclosed in his private world, Ralph is completely unable to deal with or control someone like Undine. His romantic notion of love and marriage distorts his real view of Undine and a true understanding of the kind of person she is.
He sees in her name the French word and envisions her as a water nymph. Her mother, however, explains the root of her name. Undine was the name Mrs. Spragg’s father had given to his invented product, a “hair-waver,” “from undoolay… the French for crimping” (498). From the beginning, Undine’s vibrant energy attracts him, but he cannot accept its association with industry and commerce rather than old romance. Susan Wolstenholme suggests that Ralph’s intention to marry Undine is based on a “chivalric” notion of medieval romance (100). Ralph mistakenly believes Undine to be an innocent, “the damsel in distress” in need of rescue and protection from the predations of the barbarous rich males like Peter Van Degen. Ralph seems to identify himself with the romantic lover, the medieval knight, who idealizes the Feminine that the fair lady symbolizes in medieval literature. Robert Johnson calls this “courtly love,” and argues that the ideal love is “an antidote to the patriarchal attitude” (45).

In spite of Ralph’s good intention, in the course of the novel, the reader finds that his rescue-by-marriage to Undine proves to be fatal to him because it leads to his suicide. When Elmer Moffatt reveals that he was once married to Undine, Ralph is shocked: “He seemed to be stumbling about in his inherited prejudices like a modern man in mediaeval armour,” and, the narrator continues, “the whole archaic structure of his rites and sanctions tumbled down about him” (756). The price of Ralph’s facing “a few facts” is his shooting himself to death (755). He finally realizes that he is incapable of fitting into the changing society because of “the weakness… innate in him” stemmed from the “conventions of his class,” and that he has been at the mercy of the archaic, irrelevant, and fastidious traditions of Old New York (735). Alexandra Collins comments that effeminate Ralph becomes the undine, the mermaid, himself as a victim in the world of a human society which can never accommodate him and to which he can never adjust (199).

Concerning Wharton’s use of mythology as a source of Undine’s name, Waid draws attention to Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s romance, The Undine, where a knight marries a water nymph who wishes to be human because a human woman has a soul and therefore, the promise of spiritual immortality. She is able to gain a soul only by marrying a mortal man and bearing a child. Fouqué’s story warns against seduction and the siren song of things, which are not what they seem: “The malignant power, which

85
lies in wait to deceive us, loves to lull its chosen victim to sleep with sweet songs and
golden stories” (qtd. in Waid 140).

In Ralph’s case, although he chooses Undine as his muse and wife whom he
likes to imagine as an embodiment of water nymph, the reader notes that he himself is
the source of the “sweet songs and golden stories” that seduce him to his destruction.
Waid attributes his death to his “fatal attraction to the rainbow veils of passion and the
language of lyric poetry and description” (131). He realizes too late that his visions and
his literary calling have been also warnings.

His wife does not want a child, and part of Undine’s power lies in the fact that
she has no soul. When he attempts to tell Undine about his “vision,” soulless Undine
honestly responds that she “never cared much about spirits” (545). That is why she
reacts so hysterically to the news of her pregnancy during their marriage. Undine
marries not to gain a soul but to be “placed on triumphant public display,” as Elizabeth
Ammons points out in Edith Wharton’s Argument with America (117). In other words,
Undine marries to be part of the public spectacle. Undine believes that in order to move
socially and financially upward, a woman must move beyond the situation of her first
marriage if there is another man who already has superior rank. The woman must
divorce the man who holds her back.

Undine reveals her attitude toward marriage to Ralph’s family at their
engagement dinner. She surprises the Dagonets by remarking that her friend Mabel
Lipscomb will probably “get a divorce pretty soon” because her husband “isn’t in the
right set, and I think Mabel realizes she’ll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of
him” (508). She conceives of divorce as, in Indiana Frusk’s words, “a good thing to
have,” (673) which contrasts the Dagonests’ sense that divorce is always a
“catastrophe” (728). Her solution is modern no-fault divorce when her husband makes
her feel unsatisfied, and he is not the best in her dream.

For example, she considers her marriage to Ralph as a “mistake” (732).
Wharton articulates Undine’s own assessment of her marital career in terms of mistakes
and failures. Undine has no qualms about multiple marriages: to her, marriage is a
vehicle to achieve her material and social ambitions rather than love and
companionship. She never loses her energy when it comes to attaining her goals
without considering others’ needs or questioning her own ability to get what she wants.
Unlike Lily, Undine is certain of marrying to get what she wants because she is far from the Old New Yorkers’ concept of marriage as a means for preserving the status-quo and spiritual sanctity. It is inevitable for Undine, “mere monster of vulgarity,” to “wound and destroy” the established society as she crosses its boundaries when she enters and when she leaves it (qtd. in Benstock 283; Percy Lubbock 52). When blocked, “her eyes were like the eyes of enemy” (554). In 1905, Wharton records this “handful of vulgar people” as “an engine of destruction” (Uncollected 110).

Ralph’s sister, Laura, and her friend Charles Bowen agree that American marriage customs are based on false goals. Bowen, who appears from time to time as a social commentator, states that “the average American looks down on his wife”; he gives her money to keep her occupied (581). For a man to interest his wife in his work would be to go against “the custom of the country” because he does not “rely on her judgment and help in the conduct of serious affairs” (581). From Bowen’s viewpoint, Undine is a “monstrously perfect result of the system” in which the men are concerned with business and the women are compensated for their exclusion from men’s lives with material goods:

> Why does the European woman interest herself so much more in what the men are doing? Because she’s so important to them that they make it worth her while! She’s not a parenthesis, as she is here… The answer’s obvious, isn’t it? The emotional centre of gravity’s not the same in the two hemispheres. In the effete societies it’s love, in our new one it’s business. (582)

Because of the male passion for business and his companionship in the male world of competition and intrigue, he leaves his wife out of the picture. As Bowen gives a hint about the novel’s title, “the custom of the country” is that men tell their women nothing of the workings of their business life.

Bowen, who may represent the thought of Thorstein Veblen, contends that the women who live with these men must pretend to enjoy “‘the money and the motors and the clothes and pretend to themselves and each other that that’s what really constitutes life!’” (582-83). A genteel lady does not concern herself with business, politics, international affairs, or the injustices of the industrial world.
Certainly, as a woman Undine has few choices for earning her living in a society that excludes women from business dealings. “Sternly animated by her father’s business instinct,” Undine, however, manages marriage as her business opportunity for attaining a higher social position and wealth (601-02). Jean Bolen categorizes women like Undine as living out the Athena goddess energy, born of identifying herself with the father. Merlin Stone in “The Gifts from Reclaiming Goddess History” summarizes the background of the birth of Athena: “Zeus swallowed [his wife] Metis when Athena was pregnant, hoping to receive Her counsel from inside his belly; but the child Athena was then born from his head” (214). Stone interprets this story in terms of patriarchal effort to appropriate “wisdom, pregnancy, and childbirth” as male capabilities (214).

We find a parallel between Zeus’ story and Spragg’s in terms of appropriation. Mrs. Spragg tells Ralph about the death of two of her three children who caught typhoid from drinking bad water, the ruin of her father in land speculation, and the fortune that he husband made in a deal called “the Pure Water move” (530). Simple-minded Mrs. Spragg does not recognize “the occult connection between Mr. Spragg’s domestic misfortunes and his business triumph” (499). She speaks with “virgin innocence”: [Mr. Spragg] had taken over some of poor father’s land for a bad debt, and when he got up the Pure Water move the company voted to buy the land and build the new reservoir up there: and after that we began to be better off, and it did seem as if it had come to comfort us some about the children. (499)

The fortunes of her husband have made her former housekeeping an unsuitable occupation; she even takes her exercise “vicariously,” relying on a masseuse (452). In contrast to her mother who lives a lethargic and isolated life, Undine values taking actions and the logical life of the mind. Undine’s boundless energy seems to come from absorbing her mother’s, considering Mrs. Spragg as wife and mother plays an important part in the rise of her husband’s financial success.

Like Lily, Undine is a beautiful object, a commodity, which is for sale. Undine uses her beauty as a tool because what is left for her to sell is her own body such as “her black brows, her reddish-tawny hair and the pure red and white of her complexion” (459). She must separate what she presents to the world as her outer shell from her
emotions within and the feelings for others that are usually involved in giving one’s own body over to another.

Evidently, she considers her body as a commodity rather than as an integral part of her personhood. In addition to her beauty, she later uses her husbands and her son as her possessions in the service of marketing herself in marriage ventures. With her innate business instinct, Undine seems to understand well the nature of the modern market economy which has transformed the concept of ownership from possession for personal use value to possession for exchange value.

Margaret Radin develops the “thick” and “thin” theories of the self in order to describe the relationship between personhood and the property. In Contested Commodities, Radin defines a thick identity as a status-based conception of personhood based on a “thick” relationship between a person and his or her possessions. For example, Undine’s third husband, Marquis Raymond de Chelles, has this extremely thick identity. Like Ralph, Raymond represents tradition and heritage, but his family suffers from a lack of money in its efforts to keep its country château, together with its family heirlooms such as the world-famous Boucher tapestries, the family's chief ancestral treasure. Raymond depends on the French soil for money. However, without modern methods of agriculture, it has not yielded much. Likewise, Old New Yorkers keep a strict separation between business and private life, believing that the stability of the domestic sphere can protect society from the instability of the market. The fall of Old New York at the turn of the twentieth century means the collapse of the boundary between market and non-market spheres when money enables the newcomers to obtain social standing and power.

In contrast, a thin conception of the self is “readily detachable” not only from one’s “products and possessions,” but also from one’s own “endowments and attributes,” as Radin explains (26). Undine embodies thin selfhood, which is far from any stable personal identity and the formation of any lasting interpersonal ties. As Waid notes from Undine’s name, her undulations characterize her fluctuating nature: “The most fluid of types, as her name denotes water sprite and wave motion. She remains remarkably unsubstantial, both product and process, never quite created” (136). Unstable Undine is, in a constant move from one segment of society to another, searching for new companions, unattached to any past at all. Undine may be one of the
successful people who have “no clear core of self,” in David Riesman’s words, only a set of social masks, as Lears describes as characteristic of a modern American in No Place of Grace (qtd. in Lears 8).

Undine’s skill in fitting herself into each society comes from her ability to alter her surface image. She sets out to learn the knowledge that Lily already has such as the subtleties of gesture and nuance, the grace of genteel social custom, and the layered meanings beneath the surface of conversation. She studies, guides, manipulates, and controls the social world around her, using her beauty and her imitative abilities to their fullest advantage. The narrator in the novel reveals Undine’s mimetic capacity which is required to be an apt learner: “Undine was fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative. She wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met” (457).

Undine is perfectly fit in Zizek’s model of “organization man,” a product of the modern era. Zizek in Looking Awry discusses the decline of the autonomous individual of Protestant ethic and the emergence of the “organization man” as a modern phenomenon (102). In other words, the ethic of the “heteronomous” individual, oriented toward others, replaces that of individual responsibility (102). Interestingly, Zizek indicates the replacement of our paternal ego-ideal by the feeling of loyalty to the group:

[T]he ego-ideal becomes ‘externalized’ as the expectations of the social group to which the individual belongs. The source of moral satisfaction is no longer the feeling that we resisted the pressure of our milieu and remained true to ourselves…. The subject looks at himself through the eyes of the group[;] he strives to merit its love and esteem. (102)

On the other hand, as I have mentioned above, Lears argues that this moral change brought to a crisis in the sense of selfhood among modern Americans when they began to imagine a self that is neither simple nor genuine, but fragmented, diffuse, and socially constructed.

Undine assumes that the hostess reigns over the dinner party in a more complex and subtle way than she understands. She never understands the difference between manners and mere etiquette. But by the time of her dinner with Ralph’s mother and
grandfather, “her quickness in noting external differences had already taught her to
modulate and lower her voice, and to replace ‘The i’deal’ and ‘I wouldn’t wonder’ by
more polished locutions” (506).

Concerning the habitual mimetic, Benjamin reveals an insight into the modern
man: “The smile that appears automatically on passerby wards off contact, a reflex that
functions as a mimetic shock absorber” (133). Therefore, Undine’s mimetic capacity
within her synaesthetic system does not help to incorporate outer stimuli into inner
sense-memories, but to deflect against it. In the true sense, Undine is neither a real
learner nor an assimilator. For instance, when Undine has advice from her American
friend, Madame de Trezac, to cultivate more intelligence rather than simply reading
society magazines, she tries, but quickly drops the attempt. And then, she immediately
puts more energy into her outlook and dresses.

Wharton forges Undine in opposition to the prototype of feminine ideal by
patterning her after the businessmen of the invading group in New York, taking on not
only their business tactics but also their detached emotional attitude. Undine is
detached from the traditional sense of commitment to marriage. Her actions are those
that arrive “from a motive that seem[s], at the time, as clear, as logical, as free from
distorting mists of sentimentality, as any of her father’s financial enterprises” (685).
That is, she makes reasoned decisions and moves that are “as carefully calculated as the
happiest Wall Street ‘stroke’” (685).

Elaine Showalter also identifies “the art of the deal” as central to the novel and
features Undine as a major deal-maker (88). On the other hand, Wharton portrays
Ralph as a sensitive helpmate of the spouse and a maternal figure who nurtures his son.
From this “supple twist,” Cecelia Tichi reads Wharton’s schematic reversal in gender
roles, which “feminizes Ralph and masculinizes Undine” (Tichi 99; CC 504).

In Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America, Elaine
May argues that a successful marriage needs to “maintain a delicate balance between
old-fashioned duties and modern excitement” (61). That is, May appears to find a
workable marriage right in the middle between the traditional marriage that is involved
with “a thick conception of marital obligations” and marriage as “a commercial
contract” that is located on the thin end of the spectrum (63).
As Ammons notes, Undine regards marriage as an “economic contract” (98). Evidently, her extremely thin identity reflects her logic of contract. Undine lives by the profit principle in the business world. Similar to the invaders on Wall Street, Undine weighs and measures the benefits of her marriage like a business deal as if buying or selling stocks. Undine applies the idea of the give-and-take of business arrangements to her marriage and insists upon it. She also thinks that marriage should be exactly at the point of the equal market value for both parties. Throughout her marriage and divorce history, she shows her “passionate desire to obliterate, to ‘get even’” with those who cause her “failures” (511). Based on her understanding of marriage as a contractual exchange, she feels no obligation to a contracted promise unless the consideration she receives in return meets with her expectations. In other words, unless she gets what she thinks she wants, she does not feel obligated to anyone or anything. Once she understands that she must move on, she seeks a divorce.

She first marries Elmer Moffatt, who she had met in Apex City. The marriage is short-lived when her father has the marriage annulled after she scandalizes her hometown by eloping with Elmer. As her next husband, she chooses Ralph, but soon she realizes her error of aligning herself with the wrong social group, the dying aristocrats. When Ralph has failed to live up to his end of the bargain, she thinks she is not obligated to remain married to him:

Ralph had gone into business to make more money for her, but it was plain that the ‘more’ would never be much, and that he would not achieve the quick rise to affluence which was a man’s natural tribute to woman’s merits. Undine felt herself trapped, deceived. (595-96)

Her expectation that Ralph acquiesces to her pleas of desertion and her Dakota divorce reflect an understanding of marriage as merely contractual. She is not concerned at all about breaking the continuity of the family lineage and threatening to weaken the structure of Old New York by violating the sanctity of marriage with her divorce. Rather, the possibility of divorce simply reinforces her belief in the fungibility of interpersonal relationships.

Calculation naturally comes to her even when she commits the careless action of open adultery with Van Degen. She has lived with him for two months in Paris. Van Degen might have married her, but as I have explained earlier, she scares him away.
Undaunted, she contrives to meet Raymond de Chelles, a member of old French aristocracy. However, de Chelles, as a Roman Catholic, cannot marry a divorced woman. Needing money to bribe Vatican officials into granting her an annulment, Undine threatens Ralph with the loss of custody of their son. When Ralph cannot raise the money, he commits suicide. Undine is now a widow, free to marry Raymond, and again in custody of her son. When Undine marries the French aristocrat, Raymond, she naively expects to continue to enjoy the society of his cousin, Princess Lili Estradina, and her circle. However, she notes that the dinner invitations stop arriving during her period as the Marquise de Chelles.

Instead, she finds herself trapped in the traditional role of the childless French wife, living with her mother-in-law who, by French custom, rules the house and a husband who, also by French custom, controls the money. Her marriage to Raymond grows not only wearisome, but unbearably confining, and she realizes that she has lost all comfort and pleasure along with her autonomy. Her third husband, Raymond, however, expects her to be a partner, understanding and accepting the responsibilities of marriage, thinking of the good of the group before her own desire. When she rebels, her husband refuses to father a son, the only means by which she can gain social acceptance by the old French families.

While living at St. Desert during her marriage to Raymond, Undine feels that the dullness of her life seems to have passed into her blood: “The days crawled on with a benumbing sameness…. It was the first time that Undine had seriously paused to consider the conditions of her new life, and as the days passed she began to understand that so they would continue to succeed each other till the end” (782-83). When she regretfully realizes that two of her husbands, Ralph and Raymond, prefer anonymity and privacy, their fault costs each man his marriage to the public Undine.

In revenge against Raymond and his family, she sells a priceless family heirloom, a Boucher tapestry. The purchaser is none other than the now incredibly wealthy Elmer. Undine naturally divorces Raymond to marry Elmer. She goes to Dakota, a so-called divorce state, to establish residence for the divorce; when it comes through, she and Elmer go to Nevada to get married. Elmer gives her wedding presents of a million dollars and a mansion in Paris. In Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, Mary Papke sums up the trace of Undine’s
marriages as a “meteoric rise from Apex City through the New York 400 and the French Faubourg Saint Germain to a commanding position in modern New York society” (138). Undine and Elmer unite in a marriage of like minds:

Here was someone who spoke her language, who knew her meanings, who understood instinctively all the deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms; and as she talked she once more seemed to herself intelligent, eloquent, and interesting. (799)

The pioneer quest ironically ends in her final deal, her re-merger with Elmer, prompted by “the instinctive yearning of her nature to be one with his” (821-22). As Ammons indicates, the real object of attack in the novel is not the heroine “self-centered and insensitive as she is, but the institution of marriage in the leisure class” (101-02). In Edith Wharton: Women Writers, Katherine Joslin even interprets the character of Undine as Wharton’s “heroine,” considering the “customs, manners, culture” of turn-of-the-twentieth-century America (74).

Wharton, however, continually undercuts the narrative’s more sympathetic glimpses of Undine. At the end of the novel, the reader sees Undine’s son, Paul Marvell, wandering about Elmer’s house lost and confused. After Undine’s masseuse, Mrs. Heeny, reads to Paul the newspaper clippings describing Undine’s speedy divorce and remarriage to Elmer, “one fact alone stood out for him—that she had said things that were untrue about his French father” (833).

The horrifying spectacle of meaningless plenty, untrammled by human considerations, makes ten-year-old Paul burst into tears, tears which neither Undine nor Elmer can ever understand. In “The Artist as Moralist: Edith Wharton’s Revisions to the Last Chapter of The Custom of the Country,” William MacNaughton stresses that while she was revising the novel, Wharton strategically added Paul’s perspective on his mother: “Paul Marvell’s is the third ‘angle’ from which the action is viewed suggests how important it was to Wharton to allow her reader to experience the world from the child's perspective” (53). At the same time, her apathy to her son’s tears reveals that she never realizes how she has functioned as a destructive force to other people’s lives.

When it comes to the true nature of villains, Steven Pinkers in How The Mind Works mentions the discrepancy between the media representation and the real-life
character: “In cartoons and movies, the villains are mustache-twirling degenerates, cackling with glee at their badness. In real life, villains are convinced of their rectitude” (424). In Undine’s case, when the situations go wrong, she resorts to self-pity rather than rectifying her immoral behaviors. Undine pities herself for marrying Ralph. “She found a poignant pleasure… in the question, ‘What does a young girl know of life?’” (573). As the Marquise de Chelles, Undine “felt no compunction in continuing to accept an undiminished allowance” although her allowance financially breaks her parents (817). She feels “a sentimental pity for her parents,” however: “Aside from all interested motives, she wished for their own sakes that they were better off” (817). Ironically, among her disinterested motives is the idea that her parents’ “renewed prosperity would at least have procured them the happiness of giving her what she wanted” (818). Regardless of the subject, her focus remains on herself.

More surprising is her response to Ralph’s suicide. She views Ralph’s death in terms of her advantages as now a “widow whose conspicuous beauty and independent situation made her the object of lawful aspirations” (764). The reader might guess that she takes some responsibility for Ralph’s death: “She continued to wish that she could have got what she wanted without having had to pay that particular price for it” (767). However, she is actually feeling sorry for herself when the reader observes her reaction to Paul’s inheritance: “She wished she could have got [the money] some other way—she hated the thought of it as one more instance of the perverseness with which things she was entitled to always came to her as if they had been stolen” (768). Undine turns Ralph’s tragedy, and the resulting windfall that she receives through Paul, into an occasion for self-pity and self-righteousness.

Because Undine has no scruples or discriminating tastes to undermine her ambitions, she never suffers from such conflict as Lily does between personal desire and social success. Along the way, clear conscience keeps Undine going with her desire and calculation. Therefore, Undine’s story is not tragic because she is “incapable of tragic insight,” as Joslin concludes (87).

In The Sublime Object of Ideology, Zizek’s reversed concept of “ideology” (21) not as an illusory representation of reality, but as the reality conceived as “ideological” might be useful to understand Undine. According to Zizek, “[I]deological” is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its
essence—that is, the social effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals ‘do not know what they are doing’” (21). Certainly, Undine lives in the dimension of ideology, having “false consciousness” support her reality. Zizek further argues that the subject can “enjoy his symptom” as far as its logic escapes him. As far as Undine remains “not knowing what she is doing,” she can enjoy her symptom.

At the end of the novel, Undine has arrived back where she started. Before leaving the Midwest, she had already secretly married Elmer. Many critics detect the irony when Wharton makes her return to her first husband, now in a different guise as a billionaire. Undine has apparently reached her goal by marrying a man who shares her love of wealth. Then, she soon learns that an even more prestigious position exists: the wife of an ambassador. Undine immediately presses Elmer to seek such a post but finds that her divorce disqualifies him:

She had learned that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador’s wife [...] she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for. (838)

Now, she pores over scaling even greater heights, which will be the bastion of the diplomatic world. As Zizek enlightens us, ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape intolerable reality, but it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our “reality” itself: an illusion which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel. The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel. (47)

Undine chooses Elmer as her husband the second time not simply because he is incredibly wealthy, but because she needs him to be reminded of her insatiable reality. She never marries for fulfillment. Zizek articulates that desire's raison d'etre is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire. That is to say, the realization of desire does not consist in its being “fulfilled” or “fully satisfied”; it coincides rather with the reproduction of desire as such, with its circular movement” (Looking Awry 7).
If desire wanes, anxiety occurs, in which case we must reproduce the lack that constitutes desire. When Undine meditates on her current bliss, she thinks “she had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them” (836). She finds that her marriage fulfilled as a successful economic venture does not bring her the feeling of security nor happiness. This could be the moment when she realizes there is something beyond her desires or limit of her desires because she has reached the desire’s limit with the feeling of unfulfillment.

Wharton intends Undine neither to fall, nor to fail because she begins with, and continues to be, backed by her father’s money and social position. Her surname, sprag[g], is literally a piece of wood used to jam the wheel of a vehicle to prevent its backward movement on an incline. Although Undine is never content to stop, Sprag[g] implies a stasis. That is, she has been entrapped in a circuit of her desires, never being awakened to the deceptive nature of her desires. Therefore, her unlimited energy lies in her insatiable desires. As Wolff observes, Wharton condemns Undine’s energy as such: “Only ‘free-floating’ energy is monstrous. Energy that has become divorced from human concerns is vitiated; energy that has been contaminated with insatiable hungers is emotionally distorting” (244). Wharton's original ending for the novel has Undine divorce Elmer and marry the ambassador. But, the ending, as it stands, is much more powerful because its open-endedness reflects the open-endedness of Undine's own desires, leading her life to be filled with meaningless actions. In **Twilight Sleep** (1927), through her creation of characters, Wharton continues to explore the high society in New York of 1920s, the Jazz Age, the age of “flappers, jazz babies, flagpole sitters, and bathtub gin” (Tuttleton 129). The middle-aged wives of the newly rich group are now the leaders in New York society. The next chapter will bring Pauline Manford in **Twilight Sleep** into focus. Fifty-ish Pauline is a model mother, homemaker, and philanthropist. Pauline believes money enables her and others not only to control inner and outer environments, but also to eliminate the pain that life causes. She refuses even to accept the existence of pain, reinforcing the power of positive thinking. As she tells her daughter Nona, “Being prepared to suffer is really the way to create suffering. And creating suffering is creating sin because sin and suffering are one. We ought to refuse ourselves to pain” (324). The next chapter attempts to
study the character of Pauline, aiming to discover where the pain-controlled life eventually leads her.
NOTES

1. In relation to old-stock Americans and the crisis of their survival in history, Jennie Kassanoff quotes from Theodore Roosevelt’s letter that “urges well-born Americans to resist ‘race suicide’” (54).

2. Zizek continues to define the concept of “symptom” which Marx invented. By means of detecting a certain fissure, an asymmetry, a certain “pathological” imbalance which belies the universalism of the bourgeois “rights and duties.” The “symptom” is, strictly speaking, a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation.
CHAPTER FOUR

No Pain: Soulless Pauline Manford in Twilight Sleep

Pauline Manford, in *Twilight Sleep* (1927), is a character that represents life in “the republic of the spirit” that Lawrence Selden theorizes in *The House of Mirth* (1905). Selden proposes to Lily the idea of an elitist meritocracy that offers freedom “from everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit—that’s what I call success” (*HM* 71). He argues for success as negative freedom and only his republic can attain that freedom. Selden’s republic of the spirit has to be germ-free in nature, and it must be cut off from most of the sources of vitality that challenge and stimulate people in the actual world. Individualism also characterizes his republic when he mentions it as “a country one has to find the way to one’s self” (73). Pauline leads a life in a state of hallucination, of so-called “waking dreams,” at the cost of her feminine soul in order to achieve the ideal of “the republic of the spirit” (280).

Concerning the nature of the spirit, Jung in “Aion: Phenomenology of the Self” uses the terms *animus* and *anima* as they derive from the Latin *animare*, which means to enliven, because he believes they act like enlivening soul or spirit to men and women. Jung defines the term *animus* as “the paternal Logos,” meaning “mind or spirit,” and that of *anima* as “the maternal Eros” (152). When it comes to the masculine deity in the Western mind, the ancient Greek god Apollo is the prime example. Robert Stein in “From the Liberation of Women to the Liberation of the Feminine” indicates that Apollo personifies a tendency toward detachment and impersonality in the masculine spirit. Apollonian concern is with what transcends the personal, with the unchangeable, with the eternal forms. Apollo sits on remote Olympus and dispassionately observes humans who struggle with their individual fates. Stein also notes that spiritual loftiness is his essence, and he is oblivious to individual human soul’s needs for “involvement, entanglement, proximity, melting, merging, exuberance, excess, and ecstasy” (43).

It is also remarkable that Saint Paul sparingly uses the word *soul*. James Beck in “Self and Soul” defines the soul for Paul as “the seat of the emotional/psychological life” (28). We can say that Paul’s concept of the soul is the feminine soul that contrasts
to the masculine spirit. Accordingly, Paul exhorts women not to speak up in church or in public. Interestingly, Nan Hunt in “In the Laps of the Mothers” argues that this Pauline exhortation leads to women’s repression of their “intuitive and instinctual inclinations” and to surrender of their power to “male experts and rule-makers” (71-72). This is how the Western culture not only has developed the binary framework such as “phallic masculinity” and “yin femininity,” but also has devalued “this apparent submissiveness and helplessness, this complete acceptance of what is” (Zweig 245; Stein 46).

If a woman does not abdicate power to male authorities, she becomes internally identified with her animus, the “inner figure of man at work in a woman’s psyche” (Samuels 121). Manisha Roy in “Developing the Animus as a Step Toward the New Feminine Consciousness” indicates that her identification with the animus causes her to become “rigid and overly intellectual, ultimately to lose touch with her feminine instincts” (137). Genia Haddon in “The Personal and Cultural Emergence of Yang-Femininity” clarifies the distinction between the masculine and the feminine in the sense that the masculine glorifies reason, objectivity, detachment, and noninvolvement, but condemns all the subjective feelings and life-involving emotions:

For example, the phallic emphasis in Western culture underlies the development of allopathic medicine and surgery, objective-scientific methodology and technology, and religious and legal systems that clearly codify and spell out distinctions among things. (247)

Pauline in Twilight Sleep is one of the “daughters of the patriarchy” who adopt a masculine way to cope with life (Zweig 121). Pauline is an heiress to a fortune derived from a company, “Exploit,” in the Midwest (23, 316). Her father has established Exploit, in the manner of Henry Ford, by manufacturing “one of the most popular automobiles in the United States” (11). Thirty years before, “fresh from the factory smoke of Exploit,” Pauline had met and married Arthur Wyant, a member of the Old New York aristocracy (23). Like Ralph Marvell in The Custom of the Country, Arthur is totally ineffective, but Pauline’s father philosophically accepts the match, telling her, “Better just regard him as a piece of jewellery: I guess we can afford it” (24). However, their marriage did not last long because of Arthur’s affair with his cousin while she was having a rest-cure in California.
She immediately divorces Arthur on the grounds of “immorality no high-minded woman could condone” (24). In fact, Pauline pioneers a changing attitude toward divorce when she divorces Arthur, "[i]n the early days of the new century [when] divorce had not become a social institution in New York" (26). Pauline comes from new money, and she does not feel the shame of divorce in the same way as Arthur, who comes from an Old New York family. Her main concern is with clarity, order, efficiency, and breadth of mind. And so Pauline "whitewashed" and "disinfected" her life by getting rid of her first unfaithful husband: “[Pauline] could conceive of nothing more shocking than a social organization which did not recognize divorce, and let all kinds of domestic evils fester undisturbed, instead of having people's lives disinfected and whitewashed at regular intervals, like the cellar” (21-22). It seems that she substitutes the acts of "disinfecting" and "whitewashing" for developing a real relation.

Although she divorces Arthur, she has secured through him a firm foothold in the front ranks of New York society. She subsequently marries Dexter Manford, who had arranged for her divorce from Arthur. Dexter is a self-made man from rural Minnesota whose dedication and hard work have brought him to the pinnacles of one of New York’s most prestigious law firms. Pauline has a child from each marriage, Jim Wyant from the first and Nona Manford from the second.

Pauline in her fifties has built up a considerable position in New York as a philanthropist supporting many organizations, as a patroness of the arts, and as a hostess. Compared with Undine’s baser characteristics, Pauline is sincere, loyal, and much admired by her family and New York society. Like Undine, Pauline is energetic, optimistic, and socially ambitious. Her goal is to stay busy and cheerful, and to avoid pain and scandal: “Of course there ought to be no Pain… nothing but Beauty” (14). She is a master of business and domestic detail. She schedules every hour of her day, and her family calls her boudoir the “office” (3).

Life seems to work out as she declares to her daughter: Poverty, Disease, Wrinkles, Fatigue, Misunderstanding are all False Claims. You have only to say they don’t exist and the illusions are gone. Pauline is bent on getting through life without suffering, as the narrator says: “Her whole life (if one chose to look at it from a certain angle) had been a long uninterrupted struggle against the encroachment of every form of pain” (306). Life-long years of concentrated efforts combined with her inexhaustible
money enable her to create a heaven on earth. Pauline leads a life that appears to be efficient and attractive.

With determination and energy, Pauline devotes herself to “plans for a rest-cure, for new exercises, for all sorts of promised ways of prolonging youth, activity and slenderness” because she believes that all lives are perfectible and everyone should be always happy (95). She lives by her “smiling resolves to ignore or dominate whatever was obstructive or unpleasant” (235). Her defenses in the battle against the “obstructive or unpleasant” include endless philanthropic committees, a series of masseurs and spiritual “guides,” ranging from a corrupt Mahatma to Alvah Loft, author of “Spiritual Vacuum-Cleaning” and “Beyond God,” to a Russian “Scientific Initiate” with a new treatment that “absolutely wiped out wrinkles” (279).

Pauline has faith in the comforting power of the “truth” and renewing trust in the possibility of complete and effortless happiness through the pursuit of the perfect system or creed. That explains why she is addicted to activity and grasps new ideas like “‘addicts’ do on their morphia” (179). Pauline feels excited when she encounters a new idea that begins and ends with language: “Whenever she heard a familiar word used as if it had some unsuspected and occult significance it fascinated her like a phial containing a new remedy” (138).

Pauline is also one of the strong advocates of twilight sleep with her associates, “bright, elderly women with snowy hair, eurythmic movements, and finely-wrinkled over-massaged faces … all inexorably earnest, aimlessly kind and fathomlessly pure” (5). The title of the novel, “Twilight Sleep,” is the anesthetic used in childbirth in the 1920s that will spare women the pain of childbirth so that they may “drift” into motherhood as though their children are “wax dolls” who arrive in a bouquet of flowers (14). That is, newborn babies are as efficiently produced and regulated as Ford motor-cars (15). Pauline enthusiastically promotes painless childbirth: “Of course, there ought to be no pain. It ought to be one of the loveliest, most poetic things in the world to have a baby” (14-15).

Pauline does not recognize that the idea of painless childbirth is in conflict with Genesis 3:16: “Unto the woman He [God] said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception, in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.” By evading pain in birth, the
twilight sleep method encourages women to evade maternal responsibility. When it comes to mother-child bonding, Carl Goldberg in “The Role of the Mirror in Human Suffering and in Intimacy” discusses the role of courage in pain and suffering that relates to the child’s capacity for intimacy later as an adult. Goldberg asserts that in the act of bearing a child, the mother demonstrates willingness to endure her pain and suffering in order that she may produce hope in the form of a child (519). The child’s witnessing the mother’s relationship with her own deep pain allows the child to have a relationship with the mystery of another self in which the child finds beauty and contentment. However, the repressive mother will not allow her child to probe her own fears and uncertainties because she restricts her child to the image she wishes her child to see. Goldberg warns that a child of a repressive mother will have difficulty in acts of intimacy because of a lack of confidence or courage that will allow the self to plunge into its own and the other’s unknown (527).

Pauline cuts herself off from any real contact with her children and her husband. Her husband longs for a sexual partner and her daughter has to make appointments to see her even though they live in the same house. She only aims to eliminate all firsthand emotion and thought by filling her time and her mind with artificial substitutes such as

[cheques, surgeons, nurses, private rooms in hospitals, X-rays, radium, whatever was most costly and up-to-date in the dreadful art healing—that was her first and strongest line of protection; behind it came such lesser works as rest-cures, changes of air, a seaside holiday, a whole new set of teeth, pink silk bed-spreads, stacks of picture papers, and hot-house grapes and long-stemmed roses from Cedarledge. (306-07)]

Her solutions to all problems are monetary because her mind deals only in definite and tangible facts. A hundred-dollar treatment from her latest spiritualist or a check to her bored daughter-in-law is the cures she can come up with.

To Pauline, a day in New York is a great relief after a few days in the country. It is the very artificiality that appeals to her. Pauline does not like nature over which she has no control:
Pauline was persuaded that she was fond of the country—but what she was really fond of was doing things to the country, and owning, with this object, as many acres of it as possible. (251)

Stein distinguishes between the Masculine and the Feminine attitude toward nature: “The Feminine always respects and honors nature’s mysteries. Unlike the Masculine, the Feminine seldom attempts to go against nature or to penetrate and dissect the mysteries in order to gain control over nature so that it can manipulate it to its own advantage” (46). Although the Feminine does not have the power or inclination to change the course of nature, the Feminine gets strength from its relationship to nature.

For example, Nona responds to the beauty of the garden and the woods by walking though them. Afterward a “resurrection” occurs when Nona goes “out into the April freshness with the sense of relief that the healthy feel when they escape back to life after a glimpse of death” (310). Her mother, however, quickly drives past her plantings, admiring her own efficiency and the power of her wealth. Cedarledge has cost her huge sums of money. To Pauline, to reform nature is “part of the beauty, part of the exquisite order and suitability”:

It was exhilarating to spend more money each year, to be always enlarging and improving, in small ways as well as great, to face unexpected demands with promptness and energy, beat down exorbitant charges, struggle through difficult moments, and come out at the end of the year tired but victorious, with improvements made, bills paid, and a reassuring balance in the bank. To Pauline that was “life.” (253)

In Edith Wharton’s Brave New World, Dale Bauer states that “outer life” replaces “inner life” in the modern age (6). Bauer explains this statement with symptomatic change in cultural phenomena: “the new objects and status of culture in and out of themselves—film, psychoanalysis, drugs like twilight sleep, even celebrityhood, among others—symptomized how culture operated upon the individual to erase the ‘inner life.’ Substituted in its place was the outer life, the life of standardized and commodified beauty, taste, culture” (6).

However, “outer life,” such as the endless activity and the multitude of escapes that avoid the unpleasant and numb pain, does not prevent “inner life” from being dull
and empty. Dexter dwells on the emptiness of his overscheduled life: “They seemed, all of them—lawyers, bankers, brokers, railway-directors and the rest—to be cheating their inner emptiness with activities as futile as those of the women they went home to” (189).

Geoffrey Walton in *Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation* diagnoses Pauline as a troubled individual and writes that her resort to a succession of faith-healers is to “exorcise the difficulties of living with her fellow human beings” (143). In *After the Vows Were Spoken*, Allen Stein interprets Pauline’s devotion to her reputation as a fashionable hostess as well as to any quack health faddist or transcendentalist guru as an evidence of “her dissatisfaction with the valueless way of life” she has chosen (250). Pauline is devoted to the cult of self-indulgence that dominates modern American life. Her faith is not in God because she believes that one can “believe” whatever she decides if one simply concentrates sufficiently.

But Nona’s insight into Pauline’s social activity reveals her mother’s desire to seek the spiritual truth of God, “the designs of Providence,” rather than a shield from reality or reputation (143). For example, when Amalasuntha, her cousin by her first husband, demands a party for her friend, a Roman Catholic Cardinal during the Easter holidays, Pauline manages to assemble a visiting Cardinal, the Episcopal Bishop of New York, the Chief Rabbi and her Russian Initiate at one evening party. In Nona’s opinion, the significance of the party is not that it unites “celebrities for a social ‘draw,’ as a selfish child might gather all its toys into one heap,” but that it is a kind of ecumenical council meant “to bring together the representatives of the conflicting creeds, the bearers of the multiple messages, in the hope of drawing from their contact the flash of revelation for which the whole creation groaned” (323). Nona penetrates into Pauline’s expectation to grasp the truth of God and to find the answer to life at this party.

The reader also notes Pauline’s fascination and attraction to spiritual leaders. This suggests that she should project onto them her positive animus image. Pauline may feel complete only through them, remaining blind to the mechanism of projection that creates her reality. Pauline needs to identify with the animus to know “the designs of Providence” even at the cost of losing her feminine roots. Roy guesses this is “a necessary defense against the wounded and shameful feminine image they inherited from their mothers and grandmothers” (142). Stein also elaborates on the role of
animus-projection in women’s relationship with men: “For the modern woman striving for autonomy with independence, a good connection to the phallic aspects of her nature is essential” (41). That is why “they have sold their souls to the animus, who helps them to be successful ‘men’ but not self-sufficient women” (Roy 140).

Nona will not join her mother in the search for easy answers and instant solutions because she “didn’t always believe, like her elders, that one had only to be brisk, benevolent and fond to prevail against the powers of darkness” (48). Nineteen-year-old Nona is suicidally depressive because she loves Stanley Heuston, a married man whose strongly religious wife will not consider divorce. Nona does not fit in the world of twilight sleep, which is that of life-by-panacea. Pauline snubs her daughter for taking sorrow and suffering for granted, implying that Nona is thus causing the trouble herself:

“Being prepared to suffer is really the way to create suffering. And creating suffering is creating sin, because sin and suffering are really one. We ought to refuse ourselves to pain. All the great Healers have taught us that!” Nona lifted her eyebrows in the slightly disturbing way she had. “Did Christ?” (324-25)

To Nona’s question, Pauline does not have an answer. Pauline only pitied her daughter who has “no enthusiasm, no transports of faith,” Pauline’s substitute for religion (147). Nona is easily subjected to the “moods of anxiety and discouragement” (221). Pauline tells Nona with great zeal and optimism:

I sometimes think you’d be happier if you interested yourself a little more in other people…. Don’t you think it’s glorious to belong to the only country where everybody is absolutely free, and yet we’re all made to do exactly what is best for us? (225)

In spite of her sympathy and worry for Nona, the reader notes Pauline completely out of sync with her daughter because she is in “twilight sleep” that gives her the sense of security. She might perceive in Nona’s behavior, her voice, and her implications the possibility of something being wrong, but she tells Nona, “Little girls mustn’t be afraid” (129).
In spite of Pauline’s habit of looking on the bright side of situations, and her strenuous endeavor to create a heaven on earth, Wharton makes it clear on the title page of the novel that people in twilight sleep are bound for hell. Therefore, *Twilight Sleep* is the picture of a woman who is on her way to hell. In her epigraph from *Faust*, Wharton sets up motifs of pain, sorrow, and sin. Like Faust, Pauline tries to avoid sorrow and pain: “All her life she had been used to buying off suffering with money, or denying its existence with words” (165). Sorrow says to Faust that man who avoids him is in a twilight sleep and:

- Semi-sleeping with no rest,
- He is fixed in place and groomed
- For the hell to which he’s doomed. (Faust, part 2, act 5, II. 11420-86)

Certainly, there are “frustrations” in her life (139). When she senses the threat of unhappiness, she seeks a new healer or spiritual counselor in order to put it out of mind. She trusts that the world of twilight sleep will provide “a cure for everybody’s frustrations” (139).

For a while, she holds Mahatma, with his School of Oriental Thought, in high esteem. Mahatma prescribes for her “mental deep-breathing” and eurythmics, which “certainly ha[s] reduced Mrs. Manford’s hips—and made her less nervous, too; for Mrs. Manford sometimes was nervous, in spite of her breathless pursuit of repose” (47). However, Pauline has to drop Mahatma because of rumors that Lita and Nona’s cousin, Bee, went to his establishment to learn nude-dancing. Then, Pauline pursues Alvah Loft, “The Busy Man’s Christ,” and finally, Gobine’s doctrine that the actual is of “utter unimportance” and the real is “totally non-existent” (179).

Her faith is in the power of words, which become a source of healing:

- Rejuvenation! The word dashed itself like cool spray against Pauline’s strained nerves and parched complexion. She could never hear it without longing to plunge deep into its healing waters. (319)

In spite of her efforts, “an hour of unexpected leisure” easily disturbs Pauline’s hard-earned calm because she has no idea how to fill the time (116). When her schedule leaves her a free hour because of her facial-massage artist’s illness, she sat in her boudoir, painfully oppressed by an hour of unexpected leisure… and the sense of being surrounded by a sudden void, into which
she could reach out on all sides without touching an engagement or an obligation, produced in her a sort of mental dizziness. (116)

She grows nervous, restless, and frightened by the prospect of inactivity because she does not know how to confront her thoughts even for an hour of silence. Therefore, she strives to escape the threat of “an absolutely featureless expanse of time”—that “empty hour [that] stretched away into infinity like the endless road in a nightmare” and “gaped before her like the slippery sides of an abyss” (177). The consciousness of time-passage is Pauline’s strong reminder of her way to a hell; she belongs to a society that finds a heaven by obliterating consciousness with twilight sleep.

“Today” Pauline realizes that the “breathless New York life” (175) has created a static world of mass-produced discontent and restlessness:

[Pauline] really felt it to be too much for her: she leaned back [in her car seat] and closed her lids with a sigh. But she was jerked back to consciousness by the traffic-control signal, which had immobilized the motor just when every moment was so precious. The result of every one’s being in such a hurry to get everywhere was that nobody could get anywhere. She looked across the triple row of motors in line with hers, and saw in each (as if in a vista of mirrors) an expensively dressed woman like herself, leaning forward in the same attitude of repressed impatience, the same nervous frown of hurry on her brow. (100-01)

While mirrors play a function in integrating our various senses of self into an image that we present to the world, the mirror also raises disquieting feelings in ourselves as to who we really are. In “Why the Soul?,” Richard Fenn and Donald Capps propose that the notion of the soul should be beyond conventional discussions of alienation even though the soul represents a “hypothetical point” in the individual’s subjectivity (2). They compare the soul’s immateriality to the black hole around which neighboring galaxies slowly revolve but which emits no light of its own. Therefore, they see social life itself as only a screen that the individual has invented in order to have something on which to project the unexamined and intolerable aspects of the self, which otherwise cannot be seen at all. In other words, social life is composed of doubles, in the Rankian sense, of the individual and it embodies and endures untold suffering. “Today” Pauline
experiences the latter part of the mirror function by facing herself “impatient” and discontented as mirrored in the women caught in a traffic jam.

She intends her overscheduled days to stave off the terror of the empty moment. Dexter can relate with his wife only in the shared meaninglessness of their daily lives. His attitude toward her has become a mixture of resentment and admiration for their hectic social life: “The endless going out had… gradually grown to be a soothing routine, a sort of mild drug-taking after the high pressure of professional hours, but he persisted because Pauline could not live without it” (59). Dexter is driven half mad by the senseless rush of social activities with which his wife jams their evenings.

Both Pauline and Dexter have taught Nona to revere activity as a virtue in itself without any sense of an ending. In spite of his success in his profession, Dexter had “suffered the thousand irritations inseparable from a hard-working life [:]… the fools who consume one’s patience…, the endless labour of rolling human stupidity up the steep hill of understanding” (57). Wharton alludes to the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who chained Death in a dungeon, then returned from the Underworld to live to great age. Sisyphus was caught and punished, however, by being forced to roll a heavy rock up a mountain, a rock that perpetually rolled to the bottom just as it reached the summit. Like Sisyphus, Dexter is caught in a daily cycle of toil and moil and unhappiness. It starts with “a great sense of pressure, importance and authority,” but ends with “a drop at the close into staleness and futility” (56).

Pauline is having difficulties in her marriage. Early in his marriage, Dexter yields to the demands of his wife’s energy and social ambition. But now He has a dull affair with Pauline’s friend, Gladys Toy. He is at his middle-aged crisis of confidence about sexuality and takes an interest in his stepson’s wife, Lita. He prefers “flapper” Lita to his wife because in his opinion, her “animal sincerity” is her “greatest charm” (190).

Pauline responds with added effort, wishing to win Dexter’s praise for her abilities as a homemaker. She relies on stereotypes of the “good wife” in her interactions with her husband (160). For example, although she is shocked at his request to decline a dinner invitation from the Rivingstons, “the last step of the Manford ladder” in New York society, she "heroically" submits to his desire (186, 160). Pauline
soon realizes that Dexter is not interested in a romantic and intimate evening. Rather, he wants to talk about “that fool Amalsuntha” and her son, Michelangelo, whose debts Dexter had committed Pauline to pay on the condition that Amalasuntha keep him in Italy, away from Lita and Hollywood (200). And he usually leaves Pauline feeling "inexistent" when "he did not remember to say goodnight to her: how should he have, when she was no longer there for him?” (176).

When he commits money without consulting her first, she protests inwardly but submits outwardly. She views herself as stronger for these submissions, but in hiding her true feelings she reveals little of herself to her husband. When she speaks to her husband, she genuinely desires connection with him, but she never knows what to say beyond superficial talk concerning her social activities:

If only she had known how to reveal the secret tremors that were rippling through her! There were women not half as clever and tactful—not younger, either, nor even as good-looking—who would have known at once what to say, or how to spell the mute syllables of soul-telegraphy…. Intimacy, to her, meant the tireless discussion of facts, not necessarily of a domestic order, but definite and palpable facts…. In confidential moments she preferred the homelier themes, and would have enjoyed best of all being tender and gay about the coal cellar, or reticent and brave about the leak in the boiler —and in many ways serve in lieu of the family life she carefully keeps at a distance with her “definite and palpable facts.”… What paralyzed her was the sense that, apart from his profession, her husband didn’t care for facts. (199-200)

She knows that Dexter is uninterested in and frustrated by such conversations about facts. Although she believes in the Freudian doctrine of “talking things over,” so-called talking cure, “the last time she had done so he had wounded her by replying that he preferred an aperient” (134). Dexter’s preference for a laxative and his decision to pay Michelangelo’s debts are ways to relieve himself of responsibility.

The couple’s constant concern with plumbing is symptomatic of repression. This indicates their dedication to the new “religion” of hygiene, plumbing, and sewers, which is a perfect outlet for their Freudian repressions (68). While Dexter’s repressions
erupt in infidelities, Pauline’s repression of sex, aging and death relates to her preoccupation with the benefits of science—plumbing, bathing, and cleanliness. Pauline expresses her concern about health in terms of biological plumbing:

Standing before the tall threefold mirror in her dressing-room, she glanced into the huge bathroom beyond—which looked like a biological laboratory, with its white tiles, polished pipes, weighing machines, mysterious appliances for douches, gymnastics and “physical culture.”

(20)

Pauline is unable to face physical illness and death that entail distress because she is psychologically repressed. In Edith Wharton: Art and Allusion, Helen Killoran comments that Pauline is always associated with “wintry, end-of-life colors” such as silver, blue, white, and mauve (116). For instance, when Pauline hears the news of the illness of her secretary’s mother, she meets with an instant response in money, but visiting the sick she considers morbid, aside from the risk of infection. On the other hand, Nona visits Maisie and her mother in the hospital.

Dexter fights a sense of “stealing boredom” in the middle of frantic activities (66). He feels the boredom amid the luxury. As a farm boy in Minnesota, Dexter had been brought up on the puritanical virtues of hard work, a disdain for luxury and artifice, a reverence for truth and knowledge, and a strong sense of duty. He glorifies in his profession, for law is his “calling”; it gives him “that calm sense of mastery… known only to those who were doing what they were born to do” (57). Originally awed by Pauline’s wealth and social prominence, Dexter married her and it took him twenty years of marriage to gain a perspective on the futility of the social life he leads as her husband.

Dexter married Pauline hoping that she would read aloud to him in the evenings while he reviewed law cases in a corner of his mind. Dexter has a vision of a satisfactory intellectual and professional life, with time in the country and lots of children, all built on the image of "a woman lifting a calm face from her book" (72). Dexter daydreams about his ideal woman, a pioneer woman digging potatoes in Minnesota, who is very different from either Pauline or Lita. He fantasizes about the time to feed his soul from the reservoir of silence in his family life:
In that other world, so ringing with children’s laughter, children’s wrangles, and all the healthy blustering noises of country life in a big family, there would somehow, underneath it all, be a great pool of silence, a reservoir on which one could always draw and flood one’s soul with peace. This vision was vague and contradictory, but it all seemed to meet and mingle in the woman's eyes. (80-81)

Dexter thinks of relationships in terms of romance. He once fell in love with Pauline, and in time he was disappointed because she could not measure up to the idealized perfection that he set up as his soul-image. He rejects Pauline and dreams about another romantic love that consists in the projection of the soul-image. He wants to find his missing soul revealed in the beloved and to experience the intensity and the ecstasy “in the woman’s eyes.”

Jung names this aspect of the psyche, calling it the anima, which literally means “soul” in Latin. According to Robert Johnson, the romantic love pursues an idealized image of anima as a figure of beauty and divinity, rather than loving an ordinary mortal woman. Johnson continues to observe that

> [a]t its best romanticism and romantic love are valid attempts to restore to Western consciousness what has been lost. Romanticism seeks to restore our sense of the divine side of life, the inner life, the power of imagination, myth, dream, and vision. (131)

Instead of finding the divinity, his feminine soul, through the romantic projection, Dexter finds himself a victim of Pauline’s activity, which keeps him involved in social and cultural projects. She makes sure that there will be no time to pause for real thought in order to sustain the myth of purposeful and productive activity. For example, her infinite charity has little to do with the love of mankind, but she as well as other society women undertakes it with the self in mind: “All they knew was that they were determined to force certain persons to do things that those persons preferred not to do” (5-6). The motivating factor of her labors is “causes,” rather than altruism. Having no underlying philosophy, her charity has neither logic nor morality.

In Pauline and Dexter's relationship, Wharton shows that silent "knowing" seems to be impossible. The moment of silent bonding fails to occur for the Manfords,
but silence between them paralyzes Pauline rather than giving her a sense of peace. Although she attempts to communicate, she has a limited ability to do so and she blames herself for failed communication. Nancy Bentley regards *Twilight Sleep* as Wharton’s “darkest portrait of modern intimacy” (174). In “Marriage and Modernism in Edith Wharton’s *Twilight Sleep*,” Jennifer Haytock attributes Pauline's failure to read her husband’s mind to her “inability to understand or know another individual, rooted in the inability to know oneself” (219).

Nonetheless, Pauline continues to believe that her life is perfect. Despite developing a focused personality, Pauline is unaware of disconnecting from herself and others. It seems that the powerful masculine force represses her femininity in Pauline. Erich Neumann in *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic* indicates that the apperception of the shadow, “the inferior personality” causes “the inner split” (8, 56). As a result, the ego is identified with the collective values and represses the shadow. Neumann explains that it is the identification of the ego with “the façade personality” that makes the repression possible, and the repression in its turn is the basis of the ego’s identification with the collective values by means of “the persona”: “The feeling of inferiority will be over-compensated by a tendency to exaggerated self-vindication and will culminate in a reinforcement of the repression” (56). Neumann also mentions that in repression, the excluded contents and components of the personality lose their connection with the conscious and become unconscious or forgotten.

However, when the ego unconsciously picks up the energy released from these un-lived and repressed qualities in her personality and projects the shadow onto her child rather than bears it herself, it gets serious. Concerning the projection-making, Jung explains that a person’s resistances to moral control results in projections whose effect is to “isolate the subject from his environment, since instead of a real relation to it there is only an illusory one” (146).

In Pauline’s case, she chooses to sacrifice her extremely sensible and sensitive daughter, whom Wharton presents as a bearer of Pauline’s “shadow-soul.” Concerning the damage the parents can incur in their children when parents project their shadow onto their children, Johnson, in *Owning Your Own Shadow*, asserts: “If a parent lays his shadow on a young child, that splits the personality of the child and sets the ego-shadow warfare into motion” (34).
Nona has inherited both her father’s pioneer vitality and her mother’s seriousness, and she can appreciate the traditions of Old New York. Although the “bewildered and disenchanted” postwar generation finds a panacea in the latest dance-step, and is occupied in “the ceaseless rush from thrill to thrill,” Nona is “as firm as a rock” (126). Nona is old-fashioned and morally principled: “If a woman was naturally straight, jazz and night-clubs couldn’t make her crooked” (127).

In contrast to her mother, whose “moral muscles” Nona regards as “atrophied,” Nona is morally “awake” (307). Sensing the impending family doom, Nona visualizes herself as a “trench-watcher” in the war:

Nona herself felt more and more like one of the trench-watchers pictured in the war-time papers…. She had often wondered what those men thought about during the endless hours of watching, the days and weeks when nothing happened, when no faintest shadow of a skulking enemy crossed their span of no-man’s land. What kept them from falling asleep, or from losing themselves in waking dreams, and failing to give warning when the attack impended? (280)

It is remarkable that beneath Pauline's pleasant and serene surface life, Nona’s soul is engaged in a desperate battle against pain and sorrow. Wharton uses the imagery of a trench to allude to Nona’s soul.

The third meaning in The American Heritage Dictionary of trench is a long, steep-sided valley on the ocean floor (my emphasis). This directs our attention to the fact that, in the language of Christian culture, the soul metaphorically identifies itself with the valley of life. As Hillman points out, the valley is a depressed emotional place—the vale of tears; Jesus walked this lonesome valley, the valley of the shadow of death. The very first definition of valley in The Oxford English Dictionary is a “long depression or hollow.” The meanings of vale and valley include entire subcategories referring to such sad things as the decline of years and old age, the world regarded as a place of troubles, sorrow, and weeping, and the world regarded as the scene of the mortal, the earthly, the lowly. (58)

It is in the soul that a person experiences loss, panic, abandonment and rejection, as well as inner peace and certainty of being. In this “easy rosy world,” Nona feels that she
seems to be the only person who worries (74). She muses: “I feel like the oldest person in the world, and yet with the longest life ahead of me” (281). The responsibilities pile too high and the burden is unbearable for nineteen-year-old Nona.

Pauline’s refusal to take moral responsibility forces Nona to take on the cares of her mother. Nona assumes the worries and suffering Pauline will not deal with. Nona is drifting, pessimistic, confused, unable to command the attention of her parents, in love with a married man, and aware of the deteriorating marriage of her half-brother and Lita. Nona is the only character who genuinely suffers by facing reality, and who genuinely cares about someone besides herself and, therefore, everyone turns to Nona for understanding and guidance. She is conscientious and affectionate toward Pauline’s ex-husband, “Exhibit A,” and the family crises of servants; she dutifully accompanies Lita in moving around from Cubist Cabarets to private minstrel-shows (11).

Disappointed in life and love, she tells her mother: "What troubles me is the plain human tangle, all these tangled cross-threads of life, inextricably and fatally interwoven” (217). Nona sees that people, although they may feel isolated, have intense and far-reaching effects on one another. The actions of one individual ripple outward in both space and time. Her mother's divorce from Arthur, Lita's desire to divorce Jim, and Nona's own love for Stanley have profoundly affected or have the potential to affect other people. As a result, Nona feels that no person is truly individual because humans become bits of the people around them:

This business of living—how right she had been to feel, in her ignorance, what a tortured tangle it was! Where, for instance, did one’s own self end and one’s neighbor’s begin? And how tell the locked tendrils apart in the delicate process of disentanglement? Her precocious half-knowledge of the human dilemma was combined with a youthful belief that the duration of pain was proportioned to its intensity. (220)

Nona knows her mother’s first husband, Arthur, hurt and alone after the divorce and her father caught in infidelity. After a conversation with Jim about Lita's desire for divorce, Nona suffers for her brother's situation. The pain she feels for Jim prevents her from having an affair with Stanley. Although Nona feels that "no one understood her as well as Stanley," and she believes that they have an unspoken connection, she will not be involved with him (50). She refuses to be responsible for hurting the feeling of
Stanley's wife. Therefore, Nona regards divorce as something much less than a panacea, particularly when children are involved: “Nona always ached for the bewildered progeny suddenly bundled from one home to another when their parents embarked on a new conjugal experiment; she could never have bought her happiness by a massacre of innocents” (211).

Nona realizes inescapable links of family and social ties, and her entanglement within them, and that fact makes her severely depressed. Nona is the character most consciously concerned with the nature of relationships and with both the distances and the simultaneous interconnectedness among individuals.

Nona senses that she is to be sacrificed for her mother’s foolishness. Her fate is to expiate the sins of elders:

There were moments when Nona felt oppressed by responsibilities and anxieties not of her age, apprehensions that she could not shake off and yet had not enough experience of life to know how to meet. One or two of her girl friends… had confessed to the same vague disquietude. It was as if, in the beaming determination of the middle-aged, one and all of them, to ignore sorrow and evil, “think them away” as superannuated bogies, survivals of some obsolete European superstition unworthy of enlightened Americans, to whom plumbing and dentistry had given higher standards and bi-focal glasses a clearer view of the universe—as if the demons the elder generation ignored, baulked of their natural prey, had cast their hungry shadow over the young. (47-48)

Nona cannot escape the burdens of life and the realization of evil. Incapable of evasion, she is vulnerable to suffering not only of herself, but also of others. Accordingly, the narrator describes Nona as “bewildered little Iphigenia,” known, in Greek mythology, as Agamemnon’s daughter whom her father has to sacrifice to appease Artemis, the virgin goddess of the hunt (47). Nona is well aware of the difficulty of her role as a victim offered to pay for her mother’s dauntless optimism and costly innocence: “Somebody in every family had to remember now and then that such things as wickedness, suffering and death had not yet been banished from the earth…. [P]erhaps the children had to serve as vicarious sacrifices” (48).
Nona suffers from “a deflation of the ego,” which results from the ego’s identification with the negative value, with evil (Neumann 46). Neumann explains the deflation takes the form of an overwhelming sense of sin and this pessimistic and deflationary philosophy is an expression of the disturbance of consciousness brought by the experience of the shadow side of life. Concerning human suffering, Neumann tells that the suffering brought upon man by his experience of the inherent evil in his own nature, “original sin,” threatens to destroy the individual in feelings of anxiety and guilt: “In suffering, the basic human situation of limitation is accepted and realized. The impossibility of an identification of his personal ego with the transpersonal value is experienced by man as a living reality when he suffers the tension of his dual nature and the sacrifice of his rejected side” (139, 44).

The novel reaches a climax at the Manfords’ country house in Connecticut, Cedarledge. During the Easter holidays, Pauline thinks that she can efficiently solve all problems at once by taking her entire family except Jim and Arthur to Cedarledge. However, Arthur intrudes into Lita’s room and attempts to murder Dexter in order to stop their affair. Instead of shooting Dexter, Arthur accidentally shoots Nona, who has rushed into Lita’s room as soon as she realized what was happening. Sooner or later, Pauline enters and holds wounded Nona, crying for help. Suddenly, the painful and ugly side of reality is clear to all. Pauline can no longer deceive herself regarding her own failing marriage.

But the real climax of the novel is not the wound that Nona receives, but the way Pauline resolves the situation. When she rushes into Lita’s bedroom, she sees her daughter wounded in two places in her arm, her daughter-in-law in hysterics, her former husband a little drunk and holding a revolver, and her husband. What she sees needs a great deal of explaining. Pauline, however, avoids the truth concerning the attempted murder.

The next morning, the terror, confusion and humiliation of the previous night have vanished. The newspaper reports the butler’s whitewashed version of story that a burglar had entered and forced a window open. The truth was that Pauline’s elaborate burglar alarm had caught Dexter, but the servants had disabled it when they conspired to
say that they did not see the actual intruder. All participants had cooperated to deny the reality. It is unclear to what extent Pauline knows about the night.

Because of Nona’s sacrifice, Pauline has made the party happen on the fourth day, the day after the “resurrection”: “My broken arm saved her” (363). Nona notes that her wound and suffering have made her mother’s new life possible: “Pauline’s face looked younger and fresher than ever, and as smooth and empty as if she had just been born again—‘And she has, after all,’ Nona concluded” (364). Nona senses the inhuman serenity of her mother reflected in her face that just has had “anti-wrinkle radium treatment,” “something so complete and accomplished that one could not imagine its being altered by any ulterior disturbance” (333). Pauline’s lifted face is defying Earth’s gravitational pull.

Pauline thinks she triumphs over the “irregularities” of her own family (28). However, this attitude takes a great deal of keeping up, as Edmund Wilson, in “Twilight Sleep,” points out the irony implied in Pauline’s triumph:

The hushing up and glossing over of the scandal are, of course, of the essence of Mrs. Wharton’s intention: her point and, as it were, her surprise, lie precisely in the capacity of her characters for continuing to evade the situation even when it has apparently brought the roof down on their heads. (435)

Pauline falls victim to an “ego-inflation” that causes a of state of possession in the conscious mind (Neumann 46). Neumann emphasizes that this state of possession and ego-inflation involves an attempt to disregard reality and ends in losing contact with her own limitations and becoming inhuman. The danger Neumann indicates is that the repressed contents become “regressive” and subject to “negative reinforcement” (49).

Pauline is not aware of Nona’s sacrifice at all but simply blames her daughter for “turning from a gay mocking girl into a pinched fault-finding old maid” (323). Pauline thinks being married will make Nona happy, but the thought of a modern marriage fills Nona with horror because she has been a witness to the fragile marriages of her parents and her brother. She exclaims:

“Marry! I’d a thousand times rather go into a convent and have done with it.” To Pauline’s horrified reply, “A convent—Nona! Not a
convent?” She wearily answers in the closing words of the novel, “Oh, but I mean a convent where nobody believes in anything.” (373)

At Nona’s threat to be a nun, Pauline reacts in terror as Nona watches, “with a faint smile, the old Puritan terror of gliding priests and incense and idolatry rise to the surface of her mother’s face. Perhaps that terror was the only solid fibre left in her” (372). She sees through Pauline the “ingrained Protestantism” of her Scottish forebears who recoil in horror (372). A convent for Nona is not a haven where she can practice her faith, for she has none. Her wish to find a place where no one “believes” in anything reveals that she has become a nihilist. Neumann says that in nihilistic reaction, the spiritual side is reduced to an “epiphenomenon of matter” (89). That is quite ambitious in a world where “belief” has become a byword for evasion, where one can “believe” in false spiritual guides or panaceas or can delude oneself into “believing” lies.

Nona recognizes in her mother’s eyes “the flicker of anxiety pass back and forward, like a light moving from window to window in a long-uninhabited house. The glimpse startled the girl and caught her by the heart” (314). While repressing an unendurable certainty, Pauline may not be aware that her soul is on the brink of impoverishment or even death, as implied in Nona’s metaphor of “a long-uninhabited house.” Her body is empty of soul.

The shooting had occurred, a cover-up followed, and the family members departed to “travel” around the world (362). Everyone merely travels, for “when rich people’s nerves are out of gear the pleasant remedy of travel is the first prescribed” (362). All family members except injured Nona leave for Europe or the Far East until they can return to New York with impunity and take up their lives where they have left them.

At the end of the novel, Nona lies confined to her room, recovering her physical wound but still emotionally desolate because of the breakup with her lover, Stanley, and the loss of respect for her father. Nona contemplates her family’s “perpetual evasion” of insoluble problems of pain and evil. Nona wants to know if she has somewhere she can live with her new knowledge:

Not that she really wanted to be one of them; she was not sure that she wanted to go away at all—at least not in the body. Spiritual escape was what she craved; but by what means, and whither? Perhaps it could best
be attained by staying just where she was, by sticking fast to her few square feet of obligations and responsibilities. But even this idea made not special appeal. Her obligations, her responsibilities—what were they? Negative, at best, like everything else in her life. She had thought that renunciation would mean freedom—would mean at least escape. But today it seemed to mean only a closer self-imprisonment. (306)

Disillusioned Nona renounces the luxury of innocence and comes to the conclusion that there is no escape but to continue to take upon herself the troubles of others. There is no redemption for Nona, who suffers from the spiritual impoverishment of her society. Nona is destined to drift in this anchorless group whose “self-imprisonment” treatments will lead to “aimlessness, ennui, and discontent” rather than to the freedom and happiness it thinks it has (Stein 249).

On the other hand, in spite of her thought “how wicked she had been ever to doubt the designs of Providence,” Pauline chooses not to find meaning in pain as part of God’s plan, but succeeds in avoiding pain and sorrow again and again (143). Although she is not aware that the death of her soul leads her to a hell, the reader sees her continuing to seek a way out of problems:

America really seemed to have an immediate answer for everything, from the treatment of the mentally deficient to the elucidation of the profoundest religious mysteries. In such an atmosphere of universal religious mysteries, in such an atmosphere of universal simplification, how could one’s personal problems not be solved? (225-26)³

The solution America provides is twilight sleep, but this narcotic only allows Pauline temporal well-being, not substituting for eternal rest. Pauline’s thought represents the postwar period of America, an era of “perpetual evasion, moral, mental, physical… except where money-making was concerned,” as Dexter observes earlier in the novel (56).

As Pauline expects America to solve her personal problems, so does Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence. In the 1920s, divorce is no longer scandalous and in fact has an established place in society as Nona rhetorically asks her mother of her mother’s dinner parties: “Doesn’t Maisie always have to make out a list of previous
marriages as long as a cross-word puzzle, to prevent your calling people by the wrong names?” (29). In The Age of Innocence, however, New York society in 1870s reacts in horror to the possibility of Ellen divorcing her husband.

From twelve years’ living in Europe, Ellen returns to America in order to escape the evils of the Old World. Ellen seeks a divorce from Count Olenski, her husband, a dissolute Polish nobleman. She reminds Newland that she is a Protestant, thus allowed to divorce her husband and begin a new life. Ellen wishes “to forget everything else, to become a complete American again” because everything that was bad in Europe is good in America (891). She expects her hometown, New York, to be “heaven” (853), but soon realizes that it is not quite heavenly.

In The Age of Innocence, Wharton portrays the character of Ellen who suffers through trial and tribulation, but succeeds in maintaining an economically and intellectually independent life. Wharton frees Ellen to create another kind of life from her peers in Old New York. The next chapter will return to The Age of Innocence in order to inquire into how Ellen finds a way to preserve her inner self against all difficulties and vicissitudes and to enjoy the freedom and variety of her European existence in Paris.
NOTES

1. See Judith Walzer Leavitt’s *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750-1950* for the historical medical text of childbirth.

2. In *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic*, Neumann interchangeably uses the collective values with dominant, positive or ethical values. He also indicated that a person’s illusory self-identification with positive values not only conceals the real state of affairs but also prevents and the ego and the conscious mind from achieving a genuine orientation to reality (42).

3. Pauline’s attempt to solve the problem of the world and the people seems to be one that Neumann detects in the attitude in contemporary people, which is “in an illusory way by means of a mystical, inflationary expansion of the individual, who equates himself with the pleroma, the primal spirit, the Godhead, etc., [the ego] soars into the realm of the infinite and the absolute and loses his identity in the process. A classic contemporary example of this attitude is provided by Christian Science, which simply denies the existence of the negative—but something very similar is to be found in many mystical, sectarian and political movements” (87). Similarly, Emerson in “Over-Soul” equates the soul with “light” that transcends time and space: “[T]he soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but a light…. From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all” (211).
CHAPTER FIVE
No Fear: Courageous Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence

In *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Edith Wharton characterizes Ellen Olenska as energetic and free to the same degree that she shows May Welland as conventional and predictable. Ellen fulfills Newland’s belief that women should be as free as men in order to develop into mature human beings. Not yet thirty, Ellen has achieved a kind of maturity that neither May nor the older women in the novel such as Mrs. Welland, Mrs. Archer, or even Mrs. Mingott will ever gain.

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton argues that the finest characters must have the sensitivity to assess the consequences of their actions and the courage to follow their judgment (20-21). Throughout the novel, Ellen resists the demands of others and the threat of moral dissolution by means of her stoicism and emotional maturity. But at the same time, she confidently moves through her life with a lack of self-consciousness. Ellen is the model of firm self-control and intellectual honesty, which all Wharton’s finest characters possess. In fact, any human being who wants to invent a new self must struggle not only against the outside world but also against the habits of identity the person had already molded oneself to what one thinks others want one to be.

This chapter will explore the journey that Ellen makes in psychological and physical terms to gain her “old stoical quality of courage,” the attribute that makes her one of the finest characters in Wharton’s literary works (*WF* 177). Ellen impresses people through the combination of her tender kindness and plucky courage, the former attributed by culture to women and the latter to men. These are two qualities people often think of as opposing.

Although Ellen’s story is not what captured the attention of Columbia’s Board of Trustees, the reader wonders what energy and promises Ellen’s story holds. Rachel DuPlessis, in *Writing Beyond the Ending*, explains the common theme in the typical nineteenth-century woman’s bildungsroman in terms that women must ultimately sacrifice personal quest for marriages, or they must die. Woman’s only role, her only reality, is in relation to a man, and therefore marriage is the central fact of a woman’s life. On the other hand, Duplessis notes that by “writing beyond” this paradigm,
twentieth-century women writers challenge the reductive treatment of women and correct the stereotypes that are suffused in nineteenth-century literature (3).

Wharton may be one of them in the sense that Ellen’s story ends in neither marriage nor death, neither an affair with Newland nor a return to her husband. Ellen, then, seems to be fated to be a victim of the marriage plot, which is the familiar “man-meets-woman-and-they-marry outline” (Wagner-Martin The House of Mirth: A Novel of Admonition 25). Without a husband, and without income, she is supposed to be prey to whoever can provide money. Nonetheless, Ellen sees beyond her circumstances and searches for ways to direct her own life and create a fate that is different from women in Old New York.

Ellen takes Old New York in stride. She is decidedly original, deflating New York conventions "at a stroke" (899). She imprudently changes addresses, assertively interacts with people, and exotically decorates her house by scattering it with fresh flowers, obscure Italian paintings, and French novels. However, her sense of self is not disoriented by geographical changes because, being self-reliant, she maintains her own strong core of independence. Ammons regards Ellen as a “New Woman,” defined by her independence of thought and her desire for freedom.

New York society considers Ellen a foreigner even though she is from one of the strongest clans of Old New York. According to them, Ellen was born to “continental wanderers,” and after their deaths, her “vagabond [aunt] Medora” raised her in Europe (886, 893). “A gipsy foundling,” Ellen had been a "fearless" child of "high color and high spirits" (886). The dark child unsettles the ladies in Old New York by asking “disconcerting questions,” making “precocious comments” and possessing “outlandish arts” (887). Because of Ellen’s education, experience, and training in Europe, she has become a different woman than American culture would have molded.

Her education has been hands-on in that she has practiced “drawing from the model” and playing in quintets with “professional musicians” (887). Ellen, as a child, shows her artistic aptitude and later has the advantage to learn about the real world of art and music. As opposed to the Old New York education, a European atmosphere cultivates intellectual freedom and artistic sensibilities in her. However, Old New York, with its unimaginative culture, regards her education as “expensive but incoherent” because it finds such practical training “foreign” and therefore threatening (887, 896).
Like her grandmother, Catherine Mingott, Ellen prefers foreign ways. Catherine and Ellen spend much of their time in Europe and bring foreign objects, customs, and tastes to Old New York. Later, Ellen marries Olenski, a Polish Count, making the so-called “Cinderella-type choice” and expecting to live happily ever after (Wagner 65).

At the beginning of the novel, however, the reader first sees Ellen at the opera through the eyes of Newland when she has just returned home from her morally corrupt husband. Many segments of Ellen’s story are missing, including the actual situation of her marriage. Wharton invites the reader to imagine those episodes that might have led to Ellen’s present situation. By contradicting Newland’s reading of Ellen, Wharton calls attention to the unreliability of his gaze, proving that his glance is not one that penetrates the surface.

At the opera, she shocks New York society with her audacious costume, including a “Josephine” headdress and the daring neckline “revealing… a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing” (845, 850). Ellen’s revealing clothes contrasts May’s “simple dinner dress: a close-fitting armour of whale-boned silk, slightly open in the neck, with lace ruffles filling in the crack, and tight sleeves with a flounce uncovering just enough wrist to show an Etruscan gold bracelet or a velvet band” (923). Although Newland’s initial response to Ellen’s foreignness is to regard her indiscretions as “an offence against ‘Taste,’” he soon grows attracted to the simplicity of her manner and “the mysterious authority of [her] beauty” (850, 888). Nevertheless, "something inherently dramatic, passionate and unusual in her [Ellen]" immediately fascinates Newland who had played with her when they were children (931).

Her name, Ellen, a variation of Helen, suggests aesthetic beauty in a classical sense. Helen is the Greek protégée of Aphrodite and is herself a prototype of beauty and passion. Newland sees Ellen personify the inner ideal of the eternal feminine, the goddess who lives within a man’s psyche, an image of beauty that inspires him to a sense of meaning in life. Jung names this aspect of psyche “anima,” which literally means “soul” in Latin. Jung discovers that anima personifies the feminine part of the psyche that we have always called the “soul,” which constantly appears in the dreams and myths of men, as a figure of beauty and divinity.
Consciously, however, Newland frames Ellen in the picture of the dark lady, speculating that Ellen "had lived and suffered, and also -- perhaps -- tasted mysterious joys" (922). He reflects on Ellen’s past history including “marriage to an immensely rich nobleman of legendary fame,” whom she had met at the Tuileries and who possessed “princely establishments” throughout Europe (887). Newland pictures her as an inhabitant of “a world where action followed on emotion with such Olympian speed” (970). In contrast to May’s virginal purity, Ellen embodies, for Newland, female sexual desire and female sexual agency, which would allow her an indulgent, impulsive life: Ellen seems to have obeyed such an impulse in deserting her husband.

Ellen returns to New York to secure a divorce from her husband, but she learns that she had married Olenski under French law and that therefore her husband holds her money as forfeit. Therefore, he legally holds all the economic power, thereby reducing her to what Gilman calls a state of “economic parasitism.” In order to extricate herself from her marriage, she must find a way to make a living. Even worse, her husband accuses her of infidelity with his secretary, Riviere, who helps her escape from her husband’s house. New York society does not know how to respond to the rumor that Ellen might or might not have had an affair with her husband’s secretary. Despite the rumor, Ellen’s relatives stand by her side, rallying around her when society refuses to attend the Lovell Mingott’s dinner in her honor.

Old New York believes in the sanctity of the tribe and the inviolability of marriage. Old New York also insists a woman should need a man to sustain her and should be defined only in relation to him. Letterblair, who is “the accredited legal adviser of three generations of New York gentility,” represents Old New York’s view on divorce: “‘Divorce is always unpleasant’” (913, 919). A divorce means scandal; unpleasantness must be avoided at all costs. Therefore, as long as Ellen demands a divorce, she will remain an embarrassment to her family.

On the other hand, Ellen expects New York to allow her a chance to “forget everything else, to become a complete American again” because she thinks everything that was bad in Europe is good in America (891). She reminds Newland that she is a Protestant, thus allowed to divorce her husband and to start a new life. But Newland tells Ellen: Although “our legislation favours divorce—our social customs don’t” (927). Europeans view divorce as an American habit, as Newland points out to May’s mother:
“Countess Olenska thought she would be conforming to American ideas in asking for her freedom” (954). That is “just like the extraordinary things that foreigners invent about us,” Mrs. Welland responds (954). Even Catherine still believes that a married Countess is better than a single Mingott, even though she says that Ellen is the only one of the family like her.

Moreover, Ellen’s unconventional behavior demonstrates the European kind of threat to May’s world of order and purity. For instance, on her second day in New York, Ellen makes the blunder of strolling down Fifth Avenue with a married man, Julius Beaufort, and invites Newland, her cousin May’s fiancé, to visit her house. Ellen consistently appears without a chaperon in open public spaces such as the streets of New York City, Boston, Washington, a museum, a train station, and a public park. Such errors in manners and taste make her a deviant in the society. She initially outrages and then attracts Newland.

In the view of New York society, Ellen is unforgivable because she jeopardizes May’s marriage by attracting Newland. As his heart shifts its devotion from May to Ellen, Newland fantasizes that Ellen is a woman with whom he would like to flee to a world “where [they] 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” (1069). He pleads with Ellen to elope with him to a region beyond society where they might share an autonomous existence outside the parameters of their communities. When he expresses his wish, Ellen asks him rhetorical questions: “‘Oh, my dear—’ she answers, ‘Where is that country? Have you ever been there?’” (1069).

Unlike Lawrence Selden, in The House of Mirth, who urges Lily into flight, Ellen rationally considers the consequences of the flight. Ellen, who has lived most of her life outside New York, understands that the self is always relational and that only in romantic adventure can there be a region beyond community where a person might live unfettered by the social web. Of course, Newland has not lived beyond the society, or he would know what Ellen knows: Once the train stops in Boulogne or Pisa or Monte Carlo, there will be a community waiting. They would still have to find a hotel and live among people only in a society that is “smaller and dingier and more promiscuous” (1069). Ellen knows the dinginess of the lives of unmarried couples who co-habit, whereas Newland has only conventional romantic visions. Ellen’s point is that a
territory always has a social context; there is no land beyond the group. Ellen knows, from her own life in Europe, the pain of dishonored marriages and the selfish pleasure of sexual intrigues: "the abominations you know of," as she reminds Newland, "and all the temptations you half guess" (1033).

Ellen is a clear-eyed realist who approaches anything with her eyes wide open. After their first mutual confession of feeling for each other, Ellen tells Newland that she “can’t love” him unless she “give[s] [him] up” (977). With a concrete sense of the world, and though she dearly loves Newland, she makes it clear that his lovesick "vision of you and me together" is not realistic (1069). She also knows that his love for her can never be more than a dream because it is a love that only exists in Newland’s imagination. She sees through him in the sense that Newland’s dream of love can never be anything more than a sneaking, heartbreaking affair, with the two of them "trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trust them" (1070). She also recognizes that Newland has learned to resist the temptation that lies beyond the calm order of New York and that, therefore, he would not be content for long with such a relationship.

When Newland tells her “you look at things as they are,”” she replies ””Ah—I’ve had to. I’ve had to look at the Gorgon”” (1068). She adds that the Gorgon "doesn’t blind one; but she dries up one’s tears” (1068). Ellen mentions that she found a kind of salvation by submitting to the Gorgon, a mythical figure who fastens the eyelids open so that one can never again rest in “blessed darkness” (1070). The Greek story of Medusa begins when, as a beautiful woman, Poseidon rapes her in Athena’s temple. But Athena, instead of aligning with Medusa, punishes the victim by turning Medusa into a snake-headed Gorgon with a petrifying gaze. Forever after, Medusa’s gaze turns to stone anyone who looks at her. Alan Price refers Ellen’s “look at the Gorgon” to her marriage with the Count, a man whom Wharton describes in her plans for the novel as a “charming gambler, drug-taker & debauche” (25).

Edward Whitmont in “The Future of the Feminine” indicates the importance of the woman or anima’s realizing that when she allows this ”’night phase’ of forbidden impulses to touch her, she enters the realm of Medusa, the underworld of the dark Yin” (262). Interestingly, in The Odyssey, Homer represents Medusa as a monster of the underworld. Whitmont’s “forbidden impulses” can be “shadow” in Jungian terms. Jung argues that no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable
effort and pain. Therefore, becoming conscious of it means recognizing the dark characteristics in the personality as present and real. In “Aion: Phenomenology of the Self,” Jung asserts that being conscious of the shadow is the essential condition for “self-knowledge” (145).

Naomi Lowinsky in “Mother of Mothers: the Power of the Grandmother in the Female Psyche,” explores more deeply the psychological task of redeeming the Feminine. Lowinsky explains this process is involved with confronting “the dark, surrendering to mourning and loss, and ultimately, a surrender of control,” which will give birth of a new consciousness (95). Connie Zweig calls this psychological task “the feminine journey” that is different from the masculine hero’s: “this feminine journey moves downward and inward, and demands sitting, waiting, and rotting in order to find something real, something that does not serve the patriarchy” (234). Zweig comments that during this process, her connection to the old way of life, the old sense of self, must die.

In order to show a vivid picture of the feminine journey, Zweig comes up with the myth of Sumerian Inanna and her descent into the underworld of death and terror to meet her sister, the black Ereshkigal:

Inanna journeys to the underworld to meet her shadow counterpart, Ereshkigal. With a female lookout left behind in the world above, Inanna descends, down and down. She is stripped of her adornments, her persona, her gods, even her caring nature. She faces the cold, depressed, ruthless side of the Feminine and learns to “incorporate the mother’s dark powers rather than destroying or escaping them.” She releases her masculine ideals, absorbed from a culture that devalues anything feminine. Ultimately, she is killed and her corpse is left hanging on a peg to rot. (234)

Sylvia Perera in “Descent to the Dark Goddess” sums up Inanna’s journey: “She descends, submits, and dies” (234). Inanna’s story is about confronting the loss of ego-ideals and sacrificing her self. Her facing the shadow side of the Feminine is an essential step toward developing a “Conscious Feminine principle” (234). If the darkness is not made conscious but remains underground, it can erupt in destructive force. Perera describes the process of meeting the shadow sister in underworld:
If the shadow side of the Feminine is faced and given room to breathe; if the shadow side of the patriarchy is named and put in its place; and if one’s identification with the Masculine principle can be sacrificed, then a more fully conscious sense of the Feminine can emerge in a woman.

Perera continually explains that during this phase, she must wait and refrain from acting upon her impulses, and the animus, in its turn, will release her feminine ego from its controlling position. When the Feminine is reemerging, the values of relatedness, receptivity, and love gain renewed respect.

Early in the novel, Newland is struck by her eyes, “highly trained and full of a conscious power,” and is “frightened… to think what must have gone to the making of her eyes” (889). As a reward for facing the truth of her shadow, the Gorgon not only grants Ellen spiritual sight, but also dries her tears. Ellen hints her journey to the underworld when she comments to Newland on the hollowness of New York society and adds this remark: “I’m sure I’m dead and buried, and this dear old place is heaven” (853). On every level, death is the forerunner of life renewed. There is no birth without a prior death. In other words, instead of putting all of her efforts into the attempt to achieve the superego ideal, she must learn a measure of “letting be.”

Likewise, Julie Olin-Ammentorp, in Edith Wharton’s Writings from the Great War, speculates, a “baptism of fire” purifies her character: “Ellen’s experience with the Count seems to have been a similar like the soldiers and the involved civilians [in World War I] Wharton admired, Ellen has been transformed and ennobled by suffering” (170). Ellen is soft, mature, wise, and a mortal woman who is willing to sacrifice herself for others and far more able to deal with realities than Newland.

Having realized the foolishness of trying to live “in the blessed darkness,” Ellen encourages Newland to look “not at visions, but at realities” in their relationship (1069). She insists that, despite his romantic longings, they can never be together in New York society in any open way. “There's no us in that sense,” she warns him (1070). Ellen, accordingly, convinces Newland to return home to May.

Certainly, Ellen knows that she cannot build her happiness on what would be May’s misery and humiliation. If she and Newland were to marry, they would destroy May. Nor could Newland, for it is he who has made her realize the value of sacrifice.
Newland persuades her to drop her divorce case so as not to disgrace her family. Ellen reasons with him, “You hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference. That was what I’d never known before—and it’s better than anything I’ve known” (976). She does not want to betray these ideals by disgracing her family or hurting her cousin: “I can’t go back now to that other way of thinking” (976-77). Giving up the idea of a divorce, Ellen honors her family’s wishes.

The reader recognizes that Ellen possesses the virtue of self-sacrifice even though New York society, including Newland, perceives Ellen as the contaminating foreignness under the guise of a “kinswoman” (1105). When Newland emotionally confronts her with the unhappiness of his marriage, and of his life, she wisely counters, If it’s not worth while to have given up, to have missed things, so that others may be saved from disillusionment and misery—then everything I came home for, everything that made my other life seem by contrast so bare and so poor because no one there took account of them—all these things are a sham or a dream. (1032)

Ellen also tells Newland that she has decided not to file for divorce because “[he] showed [her] how selfish and wicked it was” (974). He has shown her something better than “the things [the world] asks of one” (1152). Ellen, the “dark lady” of Newland’s dreams, bears a resemblance to the woman whose conduct repeatedly evidences her respect for the codes of Old New York (1126).

On the other hand, Newland declares that “women ought to be free—as free as we are,” but he contradicts himself when he convinces Ellen to adhere to conventions because “it was deeply distasteful to him to do anything melodramatic and conspicuous” (1095). He recites the idea of women’s freedom without conviction. His advice that she should not divorce is based on his interpretation of her silence in response to the Count’s charges that she had an affair with her husband’s secretary. Newland believes that she is guilty even though there is no evidence to support his reading that Ellen’s silence is an admission of guilt.

Later, M. Riviere privately asks Newland not to urge Ellen to return to her husband, hinting that Ellen’s marriage was bad. Riviere remarks: “If Madame Olenska’s relations understood what these things were, their opposition to her returning would no doubt be as unconditional as her own” (1042). In spite of having no proof,
Newland assumes that she has been unfaithful to her husband because his assumption fits with his reading of Ellen as a Madame X figure. Newland never supposes the possibility that she might consider the charges unworthy of her defense. Newland keeps waiting for her to produce evidence that she is innocent of these accusations, “intensely hoping for a flash of indignation, or at least a brief cry of denial” (928). Newland fantasizes Ellen as a heroine of romance, “an exposed and pitiful figure, to be saved at all costs from further wounding herself in her mad plunge against fate” (916). But Ellen neither denies the allegations nor confesses them.

New York’s reaction to her divorce petition is in accordance with the Catholic, Old World morality. In other words, she comes back only to discover that America has been made into “a copy of another country” (1030). New York is not so “heaven[ly]” when she comes to realize that an illusion prevails, which is based on lies and hypocrisies among its members (853). New York society is bound by “somebody else’s tradition,” which she thinks “stupid” (1030). Ellen rejects this falseness as a “blind conformity to tradition,” but at the same time, she faces the crisis of her self at the place that she expects to be home (1030).

Having been absent from New York for twelve years, Ellen shows that she does not understand the language of her own tribe. Furthermore, she is intentionally unwilling to comply with the customs of Old New York. Everything about Ellen signals her foreignness. As May’s mother explains to her prospective son-in-law, Newland,

I’m afraid Ellen’s ideas are not like ours. She was barely 18 when Medora Manson took her back to Europe…. That must have been at least 12 years ago; and since then Ellen has never been to America. No wonder she is completely Europeanised [sic]. (953-54)

When Ellen speaks, it is “as if she were translating from the French” (941). When she writes a note to Newland, he cannot help “smiling a little at the Frenchness” of the phrasing (950). Later, Ellen tells him that they do not speak the same language when it comes to the topics and the openness of their speech. The language of Old New York never includes words such as adultery and mistress. The reader notes that her dual life in Europe and America, not only requires her to translate among languages, but also compels her consciousness to be aware of the arbitrariness of conventions.
New York society is a world of restriction and repression, a “hieroglyphic” world in which people rarely say what they feel: “it was against all the rules of their code that the mother and son should ever allude to what was uppermost in their thoughts” and everybody is determined “to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the ‘unpleasant’ in which they had both been brought up” (874, 869, 859).

However, Ellen expects them to say exactly what they mean, but her friends and family avoid discussing sensitive issues, either by ignoring them or by withholding vital information. Simply no one wants to hear the truth if it is unpleasant. Their behavior reveals its false underside to Ellen. As she tells Newland, her family want[s] to help her—But on condition that they don’t hear anything unpleasant…. Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend! (901)

Her family members press Ellen to return to her marriage no matter what her husband is like, and they refuse to listen to the details of the marriage because such details must be unpleasant. Her family’s stubbornness, at one point, drives even the dry-eyed Ellen to tears.

Ellen falls in love with Newland because of his decency, integrity and sensitivity. Nonetheless, the narrator repeatedly tells the reader that Newland cannot “understand” Ellen, nor can she understand him (1148, 1152, 1153). In Predicament of Culture, James Clifford specifies the feeling of loneliness as “one that is filled with other people and with other accents and that does not permit a feeling of centeredness, coherent dialogue, or authentic communion” (102). Ellen feels lonely being an outcast and refugee in her homeland, and that leads her to a critical stage in her quest.

She has learned to find comfort and strength within herself rather than seeking them in the external world. Being rejected by the “world outside” makes Ellen “turn back into [her]self” and find inner refuge (976, 977). She consoles herself with this thought:

I shan’t be lonely now. I was lonely; I was afraid. But the emptiness and the darkness are gone; when I turn back into myself now I’m like a child going at night into a room where there’s always light. (977)
The enlightened room implies that Ellen actualizes a separate sphere of individuality in which she overcomes feelings such as curiosity, fear, loneliness, and anticipation. Turning inward, Ellen feels peace, inner quietness and contentment.

Similarly, Jung in Memories, Dreams, Reflections mentions about his own experience of the discovery of a “little light” that is his “consciousness” (88). Ellen’s speech seems to suggest her desire to resist the pulls of the social world, and to achieve her mode of self-reliance through soul-searching. In her short story “The Fullness of Life” (1891), Wharton draws a parallel between women’s nature and a house full of rooms, and she locates the soul, “the holy of the holies,” in the innermost room (14). In the Jungian sense, this room in an individual symbolizes the bridal chamber where the anima and the animus marry. Ellen seems to go to a very still inner center every time something happens to her; and this is a creative act, which is not passive but receptive:

I believe I know the only cure, which is to make one’s center of life inside of one’s self, not selfishly or excludingly, but with a kind of unassailable serenity—to decorate one’s inner house so richly that one is content there, glad to welcome anyone who wants to come and stay, but happy all the same when one is inevitably alone. (qtd. in Kress 131)

De Castillejo defines this place as “a state of mind wherein the masculine and feminine are consciously experienced and related to one another within each individual rather than between two individuals of the opposite sex” (49). De Castillejo also argues that achieving this inner wholeness in an individual means to find a hero within. Specifically for a woman, when she learns to own the masculine side of herself, developing her own source of autonomy and spirituality, she can begin to liberate herself from emotional dependency on men.

Ellen finally realizes that the human desire to experience the joy of natural, human love would not be fully satisfied. As Zizek argues, the real source of enjoyment is the repetitive movement of the closed circuit rather than its satisfaction. In Looking Awry, Zizek explains that lack or discontent is at the center of “enjoyment” of human love (7). Therefore, rooting out the source of enjoyment by transcending the circular path of human desire brings her to an end of suffering from discontentment of love.
Ellen acquires new growth and new life when she willingly gives up her narcissistic preoccupation with her own beauty, innocence, and purity, and becomes involved with life’s complexities, including the dark and ugly sides in her personality. The thought of loneliness does not frighten her any longer. We can say that Ellen’s courage comes from gaining compassion rather than from being forced to live by the dictates of her personal ethic in a corrupt world. This shows when she encourages love-sick Newland to look “not at visions, but at realities” (1069). Failing to comprehend Ellen, Newland only finds that her inward retreat “envelops her in a soft inaccessibility” (977).

She attempts to convince him that if they act on their attraction, she will become his mistress, no different from any woman involved with a married man. “Don’t let us be like others!” she pleads, but Newland, wrapped in passion, tells her, “I don’t profess to be different from my kind” (1087, 1088). Although New York society considers a divorce as something scandalous and virtually unthinkable, it still tolerates a degree of adultery. In the Old New York code, the “game” of deceiving one’s wife is called “protecting a woman’s honour,” but as Newland admits to himself, the act is “despicable” (1082, 1083).

That is to say, despite that “a certain measure of contempt was attached to men who continued their philandering after marriage,” society is not altogether shocked when extramarital affairs occur (845). For instance, Mrs. Rushworth is Newland’s former mistress, and Lawrence Lefferts covers up his miscellaneous affairs with lies and moralistic speeches. Lefferts, “the foremost authority on ‘form’ in New York,” is the most egregious philanderer and the exponent of the sanctity of the home (845). Unlike New Yorkers, however, Ellen is not sacrificed to the form and conventions of New York society. Rather, Ellen keeps the balance, “not artfully calculated,” in expressing her thoughts and feelings (1035). Her freely-spoken irreverence about “pompous” New York society first shocks Newland, but soon her “unabashed sincerity” fills him with “a tender awe… and made him thank the fates that no personal vanity, no sense of playing a part before sophisticated witnesses, had tempted him to tempt her” (1035).

No matter how unpleasant the subject is, Ellen insists on being “perfectly honest” with Newland, a phrase that recalls Wharton’s childhood determination to make herself “a rigid rule of absolute, unmitigated truth-telling” (1031, “Life and I” 1073).
Wharton draws attention to the theme of innocence by contrasting Ellen with Old New York. The reader concludes that the negative consequences of the innocence in Old New York such as boredom, loneliness, ignorance, evasion, and hypocrisy outweigh the value of innocence. Ellen knows playing innocence leads to dishonesty, both verbal and nonverbal.

On the other hand, through Ellen’s honesty, Wharton shows the irony that Ellen is the one who achieves her heroic innocence in rejecting the values of the Old World including those that have corrupted New York society, and in reinforcing the goodness of the New World. Riviere notices that Ellen has been changed since her return to America. Ellen’s character stands out, emphasizing her American qualities such as simplicity, naturalness, sincerity, and honesty.

Earlier in the novel, however, Ellen’s lack of concern with society’s view of her makes Newland desire to enlighten her on the subject of New York society’s customs: “A longing to enlighten [Ellen] was strong in him; and there were moments when he imagined that all she asked was to be enlightened” (949). But he eventually realizes that he does not understand Ellen and that she does not need to be enlightened. Edwin Moseley, in “The Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton’s Weak Faust,” indicates the irony in Wharton’s naming Newland as Archer because he never hit any kind of a target and that is “a pathetic miss” (158).

In spite of Newland’s biased view against Ellen, he associates her with light, both in reality and in his imagination. He notices the “inner radiance” in Ellen’s eyes that is different from the “transparency” in May’s eyes (1089, 906). When he stands by the shore of Granny Mingott’s Newport house, watching Ellen, she faces the water with her back to him. She seems transfixed, and he says to himself: “If she doesn’t turn before that sail crosses the Lime Rock light I’ll go back” (emphasis added; 1010). Newland waits until “a wide space of water sparkled between the last reef of the island and the stern of the boat” (1010). She does not turn and he walks back up the hill, but he later learns that she knew that he was there.

When he last sees her at the dinner party, a ritual of expelling her out of New York, Newland finds her face ”lusterless and almost ugly,” but, at the same time, loves it more than ever (1105). At the end of the novel, Newland also envisions Ellen as a mysterious American woman who has lived in “the golden light… the pervading
illumination” (1124). The final scene of the novel has him waiting beneath Ellen’s windows in Paris until “a light shone through the windows… as if it had been the signal he waited for” (1126). He walks back alone to his hotel.

The reader knows that fifty-seven-year-old Newland has loved Ellen secretly for twenty-nine years, and the thought of Ellen has “kept him from thinking of other women” (1115). Moreover, there is nothing to keep them apart because Ellen’s husband has been dead for several years and May has been dead for two. Nevertheless, when he finally has a chance to see her again, after having been separated for almost thirty years, he denies himself a visit, sending Dallas to Ellen with his words for her: “Say I’m old-fashioned: that’s enough” (1126). “Old-fashioned” Newland seems to be unable to live in the present. Or he may prefer living in the past’s memory to the present when he admits that the image of Ellen in his memory is stronger than the real Ellen herself. Although he has lived one life committed to his family, profession, and community, he has another life that seems equally real, a “kind of sanctuary” for “his secret thoughts and longings” which becomes for him “the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities” (1048). While he has settled for his marriage to May as a “dull duty,” Ellen has become “the composite vision of all that he had missed” (1115). At one point, he is able to make “his mind a rather empty and echoing place” where Ellen “remained in his memory simply as the most plaintive and poignant of a line of ghosts” (1003). After twenty-nine years, he recognizes his desire for Ellen as a fantasy, saying to himself, “It’s more real to me here than if I went up” (1126).

Instead of the reunion with Ellen, the novel ends with his discovery that May had always known of his love for Ellen and his “sacrifice” (1004). Newland finally realizes that his wife’s knowledge of what was in his mind and heart all those years has kept him away from Ellen. Giving up his adulterous desire and honoring his long-married life, Newland concludes that although he has lost “the flower of life,” he has gained the dignity that comes with fulfilling his duty: “After all, there was good in the old ways” (1115). Newland denies his desire for Ellen even though he still loves her. He decides to remain “what was called a faithful husband” to his wife, May, the embodiment of Old New York values and its tradition because he makes much of his bond to Old New York.
When Wharton received the Pulitzer Prize in 1921 for *The Age of Innocence*, the Columbia Board of Trustees judged that it is the American novel of 1920 because the novel “best pres[ent]s the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood” (qtd. in Lewis 433). Reading the novel as a love story about the solid American marriage, the committee found Wharton’s message optimistic and pronounced the novel “morally uplifting” (Lewis 433). Identifying themselves with Newland, who had fulfilled his duty to his wife and children, the committee thought that Wharton has validated their own social customs and values.

In spite of the committee’s positive interpretation of Newland as a “morally uplifting” character, the committee appeared to miss what Wharton underscores in her portrayal of him. Newland had been unhappy in his marriage. In fact, he had been a “coward,” as Tuttleton calls him (133). Instead of facing life’s challenges on his own, he had subjected himself to society’s plan for his life and had made his life predictable. That is why, at the novel’s end, he is left little changed from the young “dilettante” for whom “thinking over a pleasure to come often gave…a subtler satisfaction than its realization” (842). Rather than actually loving May and Ellen, he has cherished their images in his memory. In Newland’s case, the fantasy is not only pleasurable but also preferable because it is more safe:

> [T]he thought of her had run through him like fire; but now that she was beside him, and they were drifting forth into this unknown world, they seemed to have reached the kind of deeper nearness that a touch may sunder. (1028)

Ellen in the flesh and blood disrupts Newland’s image of her in his fantasy. So he chooses the yearning over a loving relationship, refusing the earth, human love, and relatedness that come with joys. Newland continues to project the sexually and intellectually exciting anima onto Ellen, who is unavailable. He seems to believe that if he bonded with Ellen, his yearning would cease.

Emerson in “Self-Reliance” asserts that living in the past makes a person “discontent” because it threatens “the sanity and authority of the soul” (212). Emerson describes a person who lives in the past not only as being “timid and apologetic,” but also as lacking self-reliance:
He is no longer upright; he dares not say ‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage… he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surrounds him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time. (158, 151)

Unless the person lets the soul rule through actions, the influence of the senses will overpower the mind to the extent that the limits of time and space come to look real and insurmountable. In “The Over-Soul,” Emerson emphasizes that to speak these limits with “levity” is the sign of insanity (212).

Newland lives a life of limitedness, unwilling to live while he is alive, and so he has no human life or human love. This is how his life becomes a “living death.” On the other hand, Ellen reveals her Emersonian insight when they meet in the antiquities room of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The intensity of their present conflict contrasts with the passivity of the artifacts in this room such as mummies, statuary, and other objects of art. Nevertheless, these artifacts are the material evidence of human struggles. Ellen, standing before a case of such objects labeled “Use Unknown,” reflects upon the “cruel” truth that nothing really matters to any human being after a few years (1086). Her insight tells the reader that material objects are temporal. Therefore, as Ellen had once mentioned, happiness does not come from living in the spirit of calculation and tolerance, but from “living in the moment” (946).

Neither does Ellen hold on to the past, nor worry about the future at all when the reader observes her flatly refuse to lend herself to head her husband’s table no matter what the compensation would be. She is keen on men’s use of women as badges of respectability. Medora Manson tells Newland what Ellen is giving up by rejecting the offer from her husband:

Those roses there on the sofa--acres like them, under glass and in the open, in his matchless terraced gardens at Nice! Jewels--historic pearls: the Sobieski emeralds--sables,--but she cares nothing for all these! Art and beauty, those she does care for, she lives for, as I always have; and those also surrounded her. Pictures, priceless furniture, music, brilliant conversation--ah, that, my dear young man, if you'll excuse me, is what you've no conception of here! (967)
Leaving behind the extravagant and “art-infused” lifestyle in France, Ellen does not regret losing it at all. She rather gains a fresh view of her past life in Europe from the perspective of New York values. Ellen acknowledges to Newland: “it was you who made me understand that under the dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those I most cared for in my other life look cheap in comparison” (1031). She recognizes that, in spite of the blemishes, New York’s virtues as embodied in May and Newland are superior to those of Europe. Furthermore, she is capable of assimilating what is valuable in her cultural heritage into a workable and realistic ideal in which personal and societal needs are fulfilled.

Although Ellen gives up art objects and fellowship with artists in Europe, she continues to live her life that reflects her artistic sensibilities. She creates beauty around herself rather than fulfilling the role as a “beautiful object.” In The Writing of Fiction, Wharton indicates the significance of objects around characters when she creates realistic characters because “the bounds of personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line, but that each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things” (7). Knowingly, Ellen always selects clothes, art, and books that demonstrate her intellectual independence and aesthetic sensibility.

Her artistic creativity transforms “Medora Manson’s shabby hired house” into an exotic, intriguing setting (895). Ellen is different from Newland’s mother and sister, who collect “American revolutionary glazed ware” (866). They consider “architecture and painting as subjects for men” (866). Unlike the varnished, tufted and gilded extension of her mother’s house that May will furnish, Ellen’s house is “intimate, ‘foreign,’ subtly suggesting old romantic scenes and sentiments” pervaded by “the scent of some far-off bazaar, a smell made up of Turkish coffee and ambergris and dried roses” (896).

Her sitting room is unlike any other woman’s in New York with slender tables of dark wood, a Greek bronze, a stretch of red damask with “Italian-looking pictures in old frames” that “bewildered him, for they were like nothing that he was accustomed to look at (and therefore able to see) when he travelled in Italy” (895). Upon entering her drawing room, Newland experiences “the faded shadowy charm of a room unlike any room he had known,” which gives him “the sense of adventure” (895). Old New Yorker’s intense concentration on the surface of life makes him acute in recognizing
Ellen’s deviations from the customary such as “only two Jacqueminot roses (of which nobody ever bought less than a dozen)” and “perfume that was not what one put on handkerchiefs” (896).

Her dress has not been quite conventional, either. As a girl, she looks like a gypsy child, in crimson; as a debutante, she is conspicuous wearing black. Even her dinner dress, “a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur,” reminds Newland of a French portrait he had seen “by the new painter, Carolus Duran, whose pictures were the sensation of the Salon” in Paris (923).

Although Ellen’s radical taste in art and literature "whetted [Newland’s] interest," he still seems more interested in figuring her as another “delicate little Greek bronze” in her drawing room rather than a creator in her own right (922, 895). Ellen’s womanly beauty and sexuality have attracted Newland. Despite that, because he has not encountered female intellect, imagination, anywhere in his training, he does not know what to think of Ellen’s traits except for being titillated by them.

For example, in Ellen’s drawing room, he notes that her books are scattered in “a part of the house in which books were usually supposed to be ‘out of place’” (922). Ellen keeps her books in her drawing room where she receives visitors and engages in conversations with them, whereas Newland shelves and reads his books in the private sphere of his library. On Ellen’s coffee table, Newland finds the works by Paul Bourget, Huysmans and the Goncourt brothers. Edmond and Jules de Goncourt and Zola are the founding fathers of French naturalism. The Goncourts refused to idealize experience, aiming to portray life as it is. Naturalism provides a harsh depiction of reality, capturing the bleakness of the human experience. French naturalists refused to allow the readers to live in fantasy unlike the escape the reader finds in romanticism. In Mimesis, Eric Auerbach summarizes naturalists’ motifs and style:

> Crude and miserable pleasures; early depravity and rapid wearing out of human material; a dissolute sex life, and a birth-rate too high for such living conditions, since intercourse is the only amusement that costs nothing; behind all this, at least among the most energetic and intelligent, revolutionary hatred on the verge of breaking out…. They are unreservedly translated into sensory terms, with no hesitation before the most unambiguous words and the ugliest scenes. The art of style has
wholly renounced producing pleasing effects in the conventional sense of the term. (511)

Betraying “unpleasant, depressing, desolate truth,” naturalists attempt to stir a strong emotion in readers for social reform (Auerbach 511). Ellen also reads J. K. Huysmans, who aligns himself with the school of naturalism. Huysmans’ *A Rebours* is a handbook to modern times—a picture of disillusionment with the natural world; this work, according to a recent critical study, “fetishizes the female body with… violence” (Bernheimer 373). Ellen’s selection of books suggests that she should not only be aware of the objectifying, fetishizing male gaze, but also understands the male perspective from which these books are written. Certainly, such readings endow Ellen with a more realistic, more accurate lens to view herself and the world around her.

On the other hand, as Newland is a self-professed 1870s’ dilettante, he is a charmed reader who often “burie[s] his head in his book” (1075). Newland reads Herbert Spencer, Alphonse Daudet, and George Eliot and fantasizes about “the intimacy of drawing rooms dominated by the talk of Merimee (whose Lettres a une Inconnue was one of his inseparables), of Thackeray, Browning or William Morris” (921-22).

Interestingly, Auerbach criticizes Realists because of inadequacy and pettiness of their works even though they are full of reality and intellect:

> The purely literary, even on the highest level of artistic acumen and amid the greatest wealth of impressions, limits the power of judgment, reduces the wealth of life, and at times distorts the outlook upon the world of phenomena. And while the writers contemptuously avert their attention from the political and economic bustle, consistently value life only as literary subject matter, and remains arrogantly and bitterly aloof from its great practical problems, in order to achieve aesthetic isolation for their work, often at great and daily expense of effort, the practical world nevertheless besets them in a thousand petty ways…. But since on the whole they lead the lives of well-to-do bourgeois, since they are comfortably housed, eat exquisitely, and indulge every craving of refined sensuality, since their existence is never threatened by great upheavals and dangers, what finally emerges, despite all their intellectual culture and artistic incorruptibility, is a strangely petty total impression: that of
an “upper bourgeois” egocentrically concerned over his aesthetic comfort, plagued by a thousand small vexations, nervous, obsessed by a mania—only in this case the mania is called “literature.” (505)

As upper bourgeois, they complacently live in isolation from the hustle and bustle of the real world. Newland’s dilettantism parallels Realists’ “mania,” in Auerbach’s term. Although he prides himself on being more well-versed in the literary arts than the other members of New York society, he never goes beyond his notion of class boundary: “In matters intellectual and artistic Newland Archer felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility” (844-45). Newland draws most of the knowledge from the books by Realists, which turns out to be incompatible with the outside world. Until the arrival of Ellen, Newland takes the observance and distinction of his circle for granted as a natural and “congenital” inheritance (845).

Old New York is a society where people live on its past, its inherited income and family estate. When Wharton represents their manners and conventions, she does not just mirror them. She continues undermining the superiority of Old New York as high society in the 1870s in order to reveal their absurdity. Sexual hypocrisy, intellectual narrowness, civic irresponsibility, and class snobbery prevail in Old New York. Newland has an affair with an older woman earlier. He drops out of civic service, being satisfied with minor accomplishments. He has little to show but the friendship of “one great man,” Teddy Roosevelt (1115).

Although Wharton implies that Ellen is well-read, we never see Ellen “buried in books” like Newland. Her selection of books also shows that she is not for fictional identification or fantasy. In “Rereading Wharton’s ‘Poor Archer,’” Emily Orlando asserts that although Ellen reads fiction, “Madame Olenska is no Madame Bovary” (66). Orlando regards fiction-reading Ellen as Wharton’s rewriting Madame Bovary, who is “immersed in romantic novels” (66). Rather than a dreamer, as Ammons describes in “Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse: Edith Wharton on Innocence and Art,” Ellen is “an artist” at heart whose creative “medium is [her own] life itself” (218).

The gipsy child becomes the “Bohemian” adult, seeking the community where she can fit (922). In spite of all her opportunities and her privileges, Ellen has become simply a “Bohemian.” But, throughout the novel, she calmly and confidently goes about her life. She comes to the opera box in order to be reacquainted with her
childhood friends; as grateful as she is for people’s kindnesses, she is not self-deprecating. There is even humor in her discourse, which suggests that she does not take herself or her society too seriously.

Ellen is compassionate and kind to her foolish aunt and is also willing to risk her place in the society if it should conflict with what she sees as important duties. For example, while she struggles to secure a divorce, she goes out when and where she is invited. She dares society’s opinion and visits Regina Beaufort after her husband’s bankruptcy. Ellen’s moral superiority to everyone around her becomes obvious in her demonstrating kindness to Regina. Old Catherine shares with Newland Ellen’s admirable character:

I asked her; and she said, “To go and see Cousin Regina”—cousin!
Now, my dear, I looked out the window and saw it wasn’t raining a drop; but I understood her, and I let her have the carriage…. I’ve always liked courage above everything.” (1079-80)

In that sense, Kress’s interpretation that Ellen’s withdrawal to inner space is her eventual cut-off from the community overlooks the notion that Ellen is an artist with her life as a medium. Although Ellen lives and travels alone, she is not isolated at all. More likely, Ellen embodies the Emersonian idea of the “great man” who “in the midst of crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (143). Left on her own, Ellen seeks out her own community she knows and understands:

They had simply, as Mrs Welland said, ‘let poor Ellen find her own level’—and that, mortifyingly and incomprehensively, was in the dim depths where the Blenkers prevailed, and ‘people who wrote’ celebrated their untidy rites. (1047)

Ellen’s tribe comprises the community of thinkers, artists and writers. With its “untidy rites,” they ignore Old New York’s rituals, tastes, and opinions. Ellen lives in an “unmapped quarter,” befriends artists, musicians and “people who write,” welcomes married men in her salon, and employs an Italian servant to whom she affectionately speaks in Italian (920). Ellen gives up being a good girl in favor of doing. Instead of trying to please those around her, she suits herself.

Because she is not a follower, Ellen does not concern herself with what is “fashionable” (898). When Newland says to her that living in “far down West Twenty-
third Street” rather than the district of lower Fifth Avenue is “not fashionable,” she replies by questioning him rhetorically: “Fashionable! Do you all think so much of that? Why not make one’s own fashions?” (898). Nonetheless, she confides to Newland, “Oh, it’s a poor little place. My relations despise it. But at any rate it’s less gloomy than the van der Luydens” (897). Henry van der Luyden, who represents the top level of society, considers Ellen’s neighborhood too “unpleasant” for his wife to visit. A fellow resident, Ned Winsett, calls it “our slum” (937). Even Ellen’s grandmother, who lives in cream-colored house in a block of brown-stones, objects to Ellen’s living in a “Bohemian” district given over to “people who wrote.”

Ellen represents an outlying region, an eccentric, Bohemian culture. “Long-haired men” and “short-haired women” do what Old New York considers inexplicable: they winter in Newport, vacation in the tombs of Yucatan, give parties for black men, chat with the Goncourts, Maupassant, and Merimee, scatter books across the drawing room, and lodge in “des quartiers excentriques” in an eclectic group of dressmakers, bird-stuffers, and writers (898).

Concerning the Bohemian in a historical sense, in “The Age of Innocence and the Bohemian Peril,” Katherine Joslin observes that Ellen embodies “the Bohemian Peril,” which is a threat to Old New York since bohemia is “a world of independent ideas and artistic expression” (106-07). In Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics, Dale Bauer also uncovers the fact that the reference to the Bohemian in the novel is not only to the artistic world of the 1920s but also to literally the influx of Bohemian peasants from Eastern Europe in 1870s. Bauer draws the historical context for the double meanings implied in the word Bohemian:

Reading the “Bohemian” in the novel simply as a sexual threat, then, ignores the 1870s anthropological influence. That Wharton creates an amalgam of 1870s and 1920s cultures is telling: the bohemian life represented a threat to culture not because of its sexual permissiveness per se but because of what it suggested about heredity and radical thought. (104)

The exclusive group, the “slippery pyramid” of the social elites, keeps the contaminating foreignness of “Bohemian quarter” out of their society in order to preserve their blood pure (920). That is why New York society must expel Ellen
whom it considers Europeanized, experienced, and therefore corrupted. Candace Waid in her introduction to the novel also insists that she should be exiled because Ellen represents at once “the return of the repressed,” an embodiment of art and sexuality (xvii). Attracting Newland who belongs to May, Ellen threatens the community itself. When May assumes that her husband has had an affair with Ellen even though he has not, the whole Old New York comes to the farewell dinner for Ellen which is, in fact, “the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe” (1105). According to Neumann, the institutions of the scapegoat psychology redeem the collective from its shadow problem by holding a ritual execution in the presence of the whole tribe: “The purification of the collective was carried out by solemnly heaping all impurity and evil upon the head of the scapegoat, which was then sent away into exile in the wilderness” (50). This ritual ensures that the conscious mind believes itself to “be identical with the higher values and commits the most appalling atrocities in the sublime self-assurance of an ‘absolutely clear conscience’” (55). In other words, people exterminate the shadow or the shortcomings in the figure of the scapegoat.

The power that Old New York has had would have destroyed Ellen if she had narcissistically reacted to it. Although she does not defend herself from the false accusation, Ellen knows how to turn around the disadvantageous situation into one that is beneficial to her. When she uses her threat to May’s marriage, her grandmother provides her enough money to live an independent life in Paris. As a result, she does not have to return to her oppressive marriage, nor does she have to manage an adulterous life with her lover. Certainly, her life in Paris, filled with Bohemian artists, musicians, thinkers, and writers, is different from that of fellow women in Old New York. Not only that, living alone in Paris, she still remains connected to New York and the family circle through the parental role she assumes with Fanny Beaufort, Beaufort’s illegitimate child who will be Newland’s daughter-in-law.

Ellen ends up having the life she wants, which is “an art-infused life spent in this rich atmosphere that [Newland] already felt to be too dense and yet too stimulating for his lungs” (1124). Over the years with May, Newland often pictures to himself what Ellen’s life in Paris would be like:

the theaters she must have been to, the pictures she must have looked at, the sober and the splendid old houses she must have frequented, the
people she must have talked with, the incessant stir of ideas, curiosities, images and associations thrown out by an intensely social race in a setting of immemorial manners. (1124)

Newland guesses Ellen had experienced “the life of art and study and pleasure that filled each mighty artery to bursting” (1124). In the novel’s last chapter, Newland’s son Dallas wants his father to rediscover his love for Ellen and sets up a meeting between his father and her. Newland, within a few minutes and a few yards from her apartment in Paris, imagines what she must look like now after “more than half a lifetime” (1124). He envisions her as ”a dark lady, pale and dark, who enjoys the freedom and variety of her European existence,” surrounding herself with “a quiet harvest of friendship” (1126, 1123). At the end, Newland decides to remain with the memory of his Ellen rather than look into the eyes of the powerful, expatriate woman.

Ellen’s life, which appears to be perfect yet incomplete, represents a new way of life for her fellow women. Not only does New York reject her and she has to leave her family and live in Paris, permanently alienated from her community, but also even Newland would not go up to see her. Hermione Lee in her biography Edith Wharton reflects on the end of the novel, Wharton’s choice of “unfulfilment for her lovers” (585). Lee expresses her sympathy to lovers:

That is what life is like, she [Wharton] tells us. Perhaps we are even meant to feel that there is some value for the soul in not getting what you want. Perhaps, too, in the intensity of “old-fashioned” thwarted love, as compared with the relative freedom of modern sexuality, there may be more passion and depth…. But this faint argument in favour of frustration and renunciation is outweighed by the novel’s haunting atmosphere of loss and grief. (585)

This dissertation’s closing chapter will consider the character whose life represents completeness. Wharton portrays Nettie Crane Struther, in The House of Mirth, who is “one of the discouraged victims of overwork… one of the superfluous fragments of life” (330). Nettie is entirely helpless because she has neither any good family background nor her own inner and physical strength. The conclusion will examine the process of how Nettie, the “victim… of over-work and anemic parentage” turns into a woman “alive with hope and energy” (330). Counterbalancing the women who betray or
exploit Lily, like Judy, Bertha, Mrs. Peniston, and Grace Stepney, Wharton presents Nettie, who has a family and a warm kitchen where she can offer food and drink to tired Lily. By personifying “the central truth of existence” (336) in the character of Nettie, Wharton demonstrates what is a key to establish a “real relation to life” and to prosper in it.
NOTES

1. Orlando elaborates on Sargent’s “Madame X” as the prototypical woman of experience.

2. According to Bauer, “Bohemian” is associated with Mediterranean stock. For example in The Age of Innocence, Wharton portrays characters such as Manson, Nastasia, and Winsetts as Bohemian with “Mason’s Spanish shawls, Nastasia’s Sicilian accent and ‘swarthy foreign looking’ demeanor, and Ned Winsetts’ radical intellectualism” (104). Old New York distrust their characteristics as expressions of “inferior ancestry compared to Nordic roots, not to mention the failed European revolutions of 1848-49” (Bauer 104).
CONCLUSION

In attempting to provide an in-depth character study in the previous chapters, I have realized something that the female characters have in common. Each of them pursues happiness based on her own concept of it, but they all end up not only being unhappy but suffering from the pain. Happy marriages and domestic bliss are not theirs in spite of their efforts. May Welland in The Age of Innocence ends up being trapped in a “deaf-and-dumb asylum” with her husband, who is also unsatisfied with their marriage (1122). Lily Bart in The House of Mirth dies of exhaustion from the ongoing struggles. At the end of The Custom of the Country, Undine Spragg wants a better husband even though she has recently married one of the few billionaires in the world. Pauline Manford in Twilight Sleep is desperate to cover her failing marriage no matter what the cost can be. Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence seems to live an idealistic life compared with other ladies in New York society, but the end of the novel makes the reader guess about her unhappiness. In creating her characters that deal with many disagreeable aspects of real life, Wharton demonstrated the inevitability of disappointment, suffering, and pain derived from imperfect human nature and the reality of human life as well as the time-honored lesson that chances for personal dignity and growth come in the guise of crises.

Compared to the American concept of marriage with its emphasis on love between husband and wife, Wharton discusses the importance of family in French marriage in The French Ways and Their Meaning:

Marriage, in France, is regarded as founded for the family and not for the husband and wife. It is designed not to make two people individually happy for a longer or shorter time, but to secure their permanent well-being as associates in the foundation of a home and the procreation of a family. (128)

Although family as the principal unit of social order promises continuity with the past and order in the present, it does not secure untroubled affection or peacefulness for the individual. Whoever is bound by marriage ties must sacrifice individual self-fulfillment or happiness. In that sense, Wharton’s female characters are not exceptions destined to be unhappy through their marriages.
Wharton’s novels create a more comprehensive context that transcends and embraces the alien opposites such as the Masculine vs. the Feminine, the old view vs. the new, happiness vs. unhappiness, and joy vs. sorrow rather than simply building a bridge between them. The result is that her fictional world is more complex and confusing than that reflects simple binary logic. Although her characters long for happiness, harmony, peace and resolution, experience teaches them that it is unhappiness, conflict, and failure that stimulate growth and enable them to evolve to another stage in life.

To Wharton, it appears that human life is in its nature a paradox. Wharton demonstrates through her characters her philosophy that paradox is the essence of living, particularly paradoxes in the human psyche. For example, Wharton takes the title of The House of Mirth from the verses Ecclesiastes 7:3-4, hinting at the paradoxical truths that happiness contains the seed of unhappiness, as well as sorrow is the other face of joy: “Sorrow is better than laughter: for by sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” Remarkably, at the end of the novel, Wharton introduces Nettie C. Struther, who used to be “dreadfully unhappy” but is now “alive with hope and energy”(330). Nettie achieves what Lily does not. Nettie is a wife, mother, and wage earner. In conclusion, I find it helpful here to examine what enables this unhappy character to undergo transformation into a woman of the “strength of the victory” (332).

Lily knows Nettie Crane as a “poor little working girl” who is “one of the discouraged victims of overwork and anemic parentage” (337, 330). Lily impulsively gives the Working Girls’ Club enough money to sponsor Nettie’s trip to a vacation home in the mountains. At the end of the novel, Nettie, who had once suffered from poverty and illness, encounters Lily sitting alone on a park bench on her return from Selden’s apartment. Nettie invites Lily to her kitchen where she can show her baby, Marry Anto’nette, named in honor of Lily and offer her some milk. This visit has a profound effect on Lily because she gets “her first glimpse of the continuity of life,” and “a vision of the solidarity of life” that Selden’s lofty talk of the “republic of the spirit” failed to provide (337). Although Nettie did not “have the heart to go on working for [her]self,” later, she found the “strength to gather up the fragments of her life” and created a home that symbolizes “the central truth of existence” (337).
Lily recognizes that Nettie’s “extraordinarily small and miraculously clean” tenement apartment and her baby constitute “a meager enough life,” one that resembles the type of life Lily “still want[s]” (248-49). Based on mutual trust, Nettie and her husband George have built a shelter for themselves and their child against the world outside: “[I]t had the frail, audacious permanence of a bird’s nest built 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” (337). Wharton shows that Nettie has formed a family where one can find companionship, encouragement, and love.

Lily wishes for the home she lacks and for the “real relation to life” that would not leave her “helpless… as the sea anemone torn from the rock” (336, 316). Once cast out of her social group, Lily cannot secure a place in a new one. The loss of human contact makes her literally ill. To place herself outside the circle is to swing “unsphered in a void of social non-existence” (336). Nevertheless, she realizes that no matter how dreadful her fall to poverty might be, her past life was empty and meaningless:

All the [society] men and women she knew were like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance: her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther’s kitchen. (337)

Wharton claims in a fragment of unpublished criticism that the experience of poverty is valuable even though it is painful because

- to the student of human nature, poverty is a powerful lens, revealing minute particles of character imperceptible to the prosperous eye.
- Wealth keeps us at arm’s length from life, poverty thrusts us into stifling propinquity with it. (qtd. in Tuttleton 350-51)

Penniless, Lily realizes that although to be poor is miserable, Nettie’s kitchen can be the center of a warm domesticity, in contrast to the disintegrating social forces which frequently permeate the houses of upper-class people.

On the other hand, scholars draw more attention to Nettie’s working-class background than to her character. In “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth,” Wai-Chee Dimock argues that Nettie’s place, as the sentimental image of
motherhood and domesticity, exemplifies the impulse of middle-class writers to sentimentalize the lower class. Dimock notes this effect as Wharton’s “gesture toward a redeeming alternative: for her the house of mirth has no exit” (791). Elizabeth Ammons in “Edith Wharton’s Hard-Working Lily” mentions that Wharton suggested that lower-class women like Nettie have a better chance at maternal and matrimonial happiness than their upper-class counterparts, who define marriage in terms of the ideology of conspicuous consumption (356). Ammons also finds in the dying Lily the “union of the leisure and the working class” in which she sees “a new hope—the New Woman that Wharton would bring to mature life in her next novel” (43). Dimock and Ammons are among scholars who interpret Nettie’s story based on class consciousness.

Frances Restuccia in "The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(s)” reads the scene in Nettie’s kitchen as being too “saccharine” to stir up hope in Nettie’s domestic arrangement (416). Restuccia dismisses the significance of Nettie’s role in Lily’s glimpse into “real relation to life.” Restuccia expresses her skepticism about Wharton’s idea through Nettie’s story that one is likely to find happiness in the domestic ideal and in traditional values. Restuccia argues that there is nothing revolutionary in Nettie’s story because she is “not only intellectually unappealing but ultimately unthreatening to male laws and power structures” (416). In “The Destruction of Lily Bart: Capitalism, Christianity, and Male Chauvinism,” Nancy Bazin also detects a defect in Wharton’s vision in the way she was sentimental about the working class: “[T]o see the traditional, male-dominated family—and especially the poor family—as an ideal is sentimental and naïve on Wharton’s part” (105). Bazin indicates that confining goodness and nurturance to the home is continuing the traditional separation of feminine and masculine spheres, which is “to justify villainy in the marketplace” (105). Nonetheless, Elaine Showalter thinks of their encounter at the end of the novel as “the strongest moment for female kinship” (144). Showalter notes the scene between Lily and Nettie is unique for its intimacy and openness.

Similarly, in Edith Wharton’s Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction, Hildegard Hoeller observes a “gift economy” functioning in Nettie’s kitchen (24). Hoeller shows how powerfully, through Nettie’s kitchen scene, Wharton declared the
alternative logic of gift-giving to that of the Market. In contrast to Gus Trenor, who gave Lily money in the guise of a gift, Lily offered money to treat Nettie in a sanatorium without asking for a return. When Lily meets Nettie, we learn that while Lily's value has fallen in the marriage market, a gift economy has been at work. Wharton suggested that such intervention should be a life-saving spiritual action. Lewis Hyde in The Gift describes the “organic” character of the gift economy, in which gifts, by moving through a circle, enlarge themselves: "Gifts that remain gifts can support an affluence of satisfaction, even without numerical abundance…. Where true, organic increase is at issue, gift exchange preserves that increase; the gift grows because living things grow" (23). Participating in the gift economy and practicing the belief in the "interdependence of all beings," Nettie and Lily restore Feminine traits such as openness, receptivity, and giving that have been repressed and violated in the Masculine public sphere (24).

In the novel, Wharton presents Gerty’s Working Girl Club as a site in which not only the gift economy reigns, but also the bridging of class differences between women could take place. Nan Hunt mentions, in “In the Laps of the Mothers,” that giving needs a healthy emotional supply out of which to give. Hunt points out that mothering requires much giving and that those who nurture life should have a childhood filled with sensitive care for their emotional health. If this is not the case for them, Hunt says that they must learn how to “re-mother” themselves (73). In that sense, the Working Girl’s Club seems to play a role of “re-mother[ing]” working-class women.

Eileen Connell in “Edith Wharton Joins the Working Classes” provides a study on the historical New York City Working Girl Clubs. Connell explains that middle- and upper-class women organized these clubs by modeling them on the women’s clubs that since the 1880s had brought women of the upper classes together in literary, social, and philanthropic events. The Working Girls’ Club in New York City was founded to meet the need of “so many girls [who] do sorely long for a good home” (Noble qtd. in Connell 580). This organization was committed “to provid[ing] comfortable lodgings, with a reading room and other modest distractions, where young women of the class employed in downtown offices might find a home when out of work, or in need of rest” (Noble qtd. in Connell 558). By offering such domestic spaces for lower-class women,
the Club furthermore cultivated the feeling of kinship in a community among women from different classes. Connell quotes one club volunteer: Clubhouses “foster(ed) a love for home and its sanctities (for working girls) in very unhomelike surroundings” (564). Supporting and nurturing one another in a new social sisterhood and motherhood created enduring bonds between women. It seems that their alliance through this support system foreshadowed the Feminist consciousness and the feminist movement of the 1960s. The Working Girl Club provided benefits for both benefactors and beneficiaries: Nettie, as a Club member, restored her physical health, and a once-troubled Lily, as a Club sponsor, returned from the country vacation house in a “glow of rejuvenation” and with a renewed confidence in her future (118).

In spite of physical recovery, Nettie suffers from heartbreak because the man she has expected to marry abandons her. He appears to have sacrificed her to his social ambitions. The reader guesses that Nettie’s emotional healing comes with “the unfailing panacea of ‘a good man’s love’” (249). George's faith, combining compassion and understanding that grows from his shared past with Nettie, brings hope to her life and “makes her renewal possible” (337).

Lily also recognizes that the real change in Nettie’s life began not when she healed her tuberculosis but when George asked her to marry him. Lily knows that Nettie has the means to “begin over again,” thanks to the generosity of George as well as that of Lily, whereas there is no one generous enough to offer a true fresh start to Lily herself (332). Soon, Lily realizes the differences between Nettie’s fate and her own: “It has taken two to build the nest; the man’s faith as well as the woman’s courage” (337). George’s faith and Nettie’s courage stand in sharp contrast to Selden’s caution and Lily’s despair.

Once, however, Selden reveals to Lily that he loves her. In the Brys’ conservatory, Selden responds to Lily’s appeal for help: “The only way I can help you is by loving you” (145). If Selden had actually made this proposal, Lily would have accepted it. But, later, she finds “a promise of rescue in [Selden’s] love” in the shame and desperation she feels after meeting with Trenor (183). However, when Lily eagerly awaits this rescue, Selden refuses to offer it because he mistakenly guesses Lily’s affair with Trenor and condemns her. Selden again forsakes her when Bertha expels her from
the Dorsets' yacht. Selden does not have faith in her until too late. He does not believe that her true self will eventually emerge from her outward, false self.

Lily reminds Selden of what has happened between them before she left his apartment on the night of her death:

Do you remember what you said to me once? That you could help me only by loving me? Well—you did love me for a moment; and it helped me. But the moment is gone—it was I who let it go. And one must go on living. Goodbye. (325-26)

Earlier, Lily feared losing her narcissistic ego and giving herself up to him. On the other hand, Nettie says to Lily that George’s faith in her was so deep that it enabled her to pick up the fragments of a broken life: “I never could have told and I’d never have married without telling; but if George cared for me enough to have me as I was, I didn’t see why I shouldn’t begin over again” (293). Nettie takes up courage and trusts in George, and the couple has reached "the central truth of existence" (337). Nettie’s courage to accept George’s love is a fruit of her new feminine consciousness that she gains after the psychological task of redeeming the Feminine. Only then can she have a meaningful relationship with her animus, men, and society.

Although Nettie does not share with Lily the story of her journey to the underworld, the reader knows that Nettie has despaired and suffered. Poverty brought her the loss of her lover to another woman as well as physical illness:

I'd known a gentleman where I was employed—I don't know as you remember I did type-writing in a big importing firm—and—well—I thought we were to be married: he'd gone steady with me six months and given me his mother's wedding ring. But I presume he was too stylish for me—he travelled for the firm, and had seen a great deal of society. Work girls aren't looked after the way you are, and they don't always know how to look after themselves. I didn't . . . and it pretty near killed me when he went away and left off writing . . . It was then I came down sick—I thought it was the end of everything. (332)

The reader can reconstruct Nettie’s underground experience based on what she says to Lily here. Nettie must have confronted the inner Masculine voice that continually
makes her feel ashamed and inadequate about aspects of herself that appear weak, helpless, dependent, and impotent when viewed from the overly Masculine perspective of strength, intelligence, and power. In *Knowing Woman*, Castillejo detects the persistence of the inner voice in every woman, “You are no good” (66). Castillejo believes this is “her negative animus picking up man’s collective unconscious fear of woman’s rivalry, and his passionate desire to keep her in her place” (66). These negative feelings about Nettie herself would lead toward her mother, from whom she inherited anemia. These negative feelings would accumulate negative energy, resulting in undermining the ability to love as well as blocking relatedness and constructive action. Poverty-stricken and lovesick Nettie was feeling almost dead and fallen to the underworld where she suffered from secret stress and physical illness.

The imbalance of the Masculine principle leads to its opposite and initiates into healing the internalized girl-child and rehabilitating the internalized mother. Although the apparent submissiveness and helplessness, and the complete acceptance of “what it is” characterize aspects of the Feminine, Femininity has its own power. It seems that the New Woman gained a new persona only to lose touch with the Feminine instinct to guide her back to herself. Roy also observes that contemporary woman who emulates the journey of the separation from the mother has the hardest time entering her emotions, especially the painful ones. Hunt argues that forgiveness is a crucial goal for the well-being of women because it helps to restore “the Good Mother archetype” (74). Otherwise, Hunt warns: “Whatever is repressed acquires additional energy, the kind of energy nightmares contain” (73). Therefore, one must attempt to find a way of effecting the necessary change so that it will not backfire. The change means, according to Edward Whitmont, “to learn to affirm one’s psychological pregnancy and sensitivity and thereby reclaim one’s own femininity, the personalizing and civilizing force arising out of subjective chaos” (260).

Furthermore, rehabilitation of “the Good Mother” reminds us of the long-dead Greek Goddess Metis, a pre-Olympian goddess of wisdom, whom Hesiod called “the wisest of all” (qtd. in Stone 214). Metis was the first wife of Zeus, but he swallowed her when she was pregnant with Athena. In “The Gifts from Reclaiming Goddess History,” through the Metis story, Merlin Stone shows how belittled Feminine attributes had been and the necessity to reclaim the Feminine wisdom that had been “tricked into
becoming small and had disappeared from view, swallowed so to speak by the patriarchy” (218).

In “The Personal and Cultural Emergence of Yang-Femininity,” Genia Haddon points out the womb’s birthing power, so-called, “yang-femininity” that affirms the power of the instinctive Feminine within a woman (242). Haddon explains that it is no longer sufficient for one to be assertive solely through the Masculine principle. One must come to know that sometimes being assertive is Feminine. Haddon also suggests that a compassionate demand for authenticity rooted in the actual context of each situation should replace preoccupation with authoritarian “oughts” (253).

Once an innocent victim, “one of the superfluous fragments of life destined to be swept prematurely into that social refuse-heap” (330), Nettie fell into the underworld, but found a way back. In order to acquire new growth and new life, Nettie has to die to her maidenly, narcissistic preoccupation with her own beauty, innocence, and purity. She also has to be involved with life’s complexities, including her dark and ugly sides and her own potentialities. After she consciously endures and suffers, she is able to live on a new level of consciousness. She gains her energy, “yang-femininity,” being able to love George with whom she makes an individualized relationship. She is concerned with his needs and well-being, not fixated on her own wants and whims. She takes her love off the level of fantasy and converts it into earthy, practical immediacy. The fruit of the union with George is joy and wholeness that her baby embodies. The reader and Lily observe that Nettie has become a confident, nurturing caretaker of new life, her daughter. Nettie is redeemed not only because she accepted outside intervention but because she has gone through the process of individuation.

When we explore the context in which Wharton’s characters were shaped, we recognize their role in fulfilling readers’ need to give meaning and order to their personal lives in the past, the present and the future, to their surroundings, and the world in which they live. Henry James, in a 1914 letter to Wharton, reveals his awareness of an abrupt break from the past, quoting Walter Scott, “It’s impossible to ‘locate anything in our time’” (Powers 316). Wharton expresses the sense of rupture in the history as well: “If anyone had suggested to me before 1914, to write my reminiscences, I should have answered that my life had been too uneventful to be worth recording” (BG 6). Wharton needs to assert a historical continuity through her novels when World War I
changed everything and Old New York was fated to extinction. In that way, Wharton’s novels continue the campaign that the nineteenth-century woman’s fiction set out to make women “think better of themselves... as beings with ‘immortal destiny’” (Baym 299) even if she breaks out of its dominant character type and moralistic tone.

May, Undine and Pauline in each marriage adapt themselves to the requirements of the age, of their personal environment, and of the community by wearing the persona, the mask, what they pass for and what they appear to be in contrast to their real individual nature. On the other hand, Lily and Ellen both yearn for separation and individuality, and each appears to be fighting a losing battle against New York society that regards individuality as the central problem of community. Their personal crises drive them into dilemmas that they would never enter if left to their own free will. The self-assurance of the ego on the one hand and the increasing pressure of the dark side on the other lead both Lily and Ellen to a split in the individual. Their seemingly losing battles, however, turn out to be the growing-points when they undertake the journey of individuation by taking the external risk. The process of individuation enables each of them to be aware of her own Self as a paradoxical totality in which the ego and the shadow are linked. As Colegrave describes, the rebirth a woman experiences is the result of the symbolic death of the ego, and the rise of the Self, the archetype of wholeness, which is transcending the level of the past and being reborn to a new consciousness.


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BIOGRAphical Sketch

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