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# Female Art and Artisans in Edith Wharton's the House of Mirth, the Custom of the Country, and "Roman Fever"

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FEMALE ART AND ARTISANS IN EDITH WHARTON'S *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*, *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*, AND "ROMAN FEVER"

by

JULIA WELCH

(Under the Direction of Caren Town)

ABSTRACT

In early twentieth century old and new New York social circles, the marriage market's commodification of women acted as the controlling factor for relationships, female power, and personal identity. When considering Wharton's works for the first-hand viewpoint that she provided of the marriage market, it becomes clear that her interest in art plays heavily into the way women comport themselves within her novels. In order to discuss this relationship in Edith Wharton's works, I've created terms that delineate the various ways female characters respond to the pressures of the marriage market. The best way to analyze Wharton's women is by breaking down their interactions with the art and settings of scenes in the text. I've used *art* and *artisan* to more easily categorize these characters. An *art* figure knows how to use her beauty to get attention, particularly that of a prominent man. The male gaze determines the worth of a woman as art, and the purveyor becomes husband if the art is suitable enough to be a bride. The *artisan* figure is a female character that can use her beauty as art to attract marriage while also being independent enough to progress in social standing. She may also have a marketable skill, and she always governs her life without regard for societal expectations. In this thesis, I analyze Wharton's works from the beginning, middle, and end of her career to show her growth as an author and to test the applicability of these terms. This analysis provides reasoning for why Edith Wharton chooses to kill off one female protagonist but let another live. The driving factor behind

all of the women's lives is the need to serve a purpose, either by marketing themselves as art to be enjoyed by another or creating their own space to dictate what they find to be beautiful.

INDEX WORDS: Edith Wharton, Roman Fever, Custom of the Country, House of Mirth, Art, Artisan, Marriage market, Commodification, Gender, Performativity, New York, Social constructions, Class, Women characters, Beauty, Third space, Design, Market, Purpose

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CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*, AND "ROMAN FEVER"

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my parents, who gave me this opportunity and supported my decisions. It's also for Sam, who offered me patience when I had none for myself.

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## INTRODUCTION

In early twentieth century old and new New York social circles, the marriage market's commodification of women acted as the controlling factor for relationships, female power, and personal identity. When considering Wharton's works for the first-hand viewpoint that she provided of the marriage market, it becomes clear that her interest in art plays heavily into the way women comport themselves within her novels. In order to discuss this relationship in Edith Wharton's works, I've created terms that delineate the various ways female characters respond to the pressures of the marriage market. Using the terms *art* or *artisan* to label Wharton's women helps the reader understand why some characters succeed or fail.

The best way to analyze this is by breaking down their interactions with the art and settings of scenes in the text. As Wharton remarks, "each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things" (*Writing of Fiction* 7). Women in the marriage market act according to custom and often mimic the popular art styles in an attempt to become a vision of the *art nouveau* female caricature. An *art* figure knows how to use her beauty to get attention, particularly that of a prominent man. The male gaze determines the worth of a woman as art, and the purveyor becomes husband if the art is suitable enough to be a bride. The *artisan* figure is a female character that can use her beauty as art to attract marriage while also being independent enough to progress in social standing. She may also have a marketable skill, and she always governs her life without regard for societal expectations.

In this thesis, I analyze Wharton's works from the beginning, middle, and end of her career to show her growth as an author and to test the applicability of these terms. Chapter One introduces the marriage market, women's roles historically, and Wharton's life experiences that contribute to the way art is employed in her works. Chapter Two introduces and utilizes the

proposed terms in explaining why Lily Bart dies at the end of *The House of Mirth* (1905). The next chapter analyzes an artisan figure through the success of Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* (1913), which acts as a sampling for the middle of Wharton's career. Chapter 4 looks at an example of her later works, "Roman Fever" (1934). This is helpful in demonstrating how to apply the terms to a smaller work with limited characters and more ambiguous endings. These terms and analysis provides reasoning for why Edith Wharton chooses to kill off one female protagonist but let another live. The driving factor behind all of the women's lives is the need to serve a purpose, either by marketing themselves as art to be enjoyed by another or creating their own space to dictate what they find to be beautiful.

## CHAPTER 1

## Wharton and Design

After the Spanish-American War of 1898, and the subsequent increase in the United States' global power, the American economy produced new jobs and new money. Old-moneyed families started (reluctantly, for the most part) to socialize with those in the first generation of earned new money, and growth in the economy and industries increased immigration and national pride among all social classes. As a response to this burst in national pride, the *art nouveau* movement in America created artistic renderings of an ethereal virgin woman immortalized in murals that capture the sense of the American spirit, with many of them being based on the newly constructed Statue of Liberty. These women would usually appear surrounded by a luscious scene of flowers or expensive décor, and veiled in a flowing dress of white to denote their purity of heart and steadfast morals. This image then started to influence *real* women, such as Wharton, who were challenged to be as pure and as beautiful as a work of art. During the same time, options for poor women were extremely limited, despite the rising prosperity for the country. Prostitution and factory jobs were more laborious than monetarily productive, but they seemed to be the only options available to women who couldn't market themselves as works of art.

Li-Wen Chang discusses the extremely limited options for women like Wharton who were born into higher social class in her article, "Women in the Public: Society Women in Edith Wharton's Fiction" (2011). Chang writes:

As Wharton highlights in her novels, paid work outside the home or/and heterosexual marriage is, in practical terms, profitless for leisure-class women whose ultimate function in the public is to inflate their husbands' financial image and to promote the male

breadwinner ideal. Industrialization and money economy might have released women from the bulk of household responsibilities and made society their new workplace, but women's role in the public remains inferior to men's. (275)

Thus, women in New York's social circles were expected to organize the house, attend or host social events if they were married, or market themselves as marriageable if they were single. Being marriageable required an active social schedule, maintaining a network of friends, investing money in socializing, and designing themselves to reflect this new artistic style.

The marriage market may best be examined when broken down to the most basic of relationship between the genders of man and woman. According to theorist Judith Butler, the entire basis of a binary gender system relies on the way man and the masculine respond to woman and the feminine, and vice versa. For this time period, women were reflecting the wants of men based on socio-cultural stereotypes. Butler explains in her book, *Gender Trouble* (1999), "The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it" (46). There are always expectations of each gender toward the other. The qualities that a society deems feminine are what guide the performance of women within that society. Wharton did this all her life. Her avid study of the way men and women determine each other's actions, the gendered roles required by each sex, and the way art contributed to the ideal of what beauty is, helped her to create characters that reflected true feminine archetypes. It is in the binary system of gender that female characters must conform to in order to properly represent real women of the time. In Wharton's realism, especially her novels, the marriage market is the best way to analyze the interactions and expectations of both genders.

The time period Wharton grew up in had established expectations of each gender, and the burden of not breaking from these sexed rules fell heavily upon women. In the higher social circles, the only skills that women were taught to develop were associated with marriage, such as being attractive to men, conducting a household's social events, and knowing the most-recent styles. It was into this old New York class system that Edith Wharton emerged.

Edith Newbold Jones was born in a spacious brownstone at 14 West Twenty-Third Street in New York on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1862. Her mother, Lucretia Stephens Rhinelanders Jones, was already a matron in her late thirties when she gave birth to Edith. She already had two sons, Frederic and Henry, aged sixteen and eleven, respectively. Edith's birth was not planned and there were rumors surrounding who her biological father was, which embarrassed Lucretia and created tension between mother and daughter. Regardless of the rumors, Edith's legal father was George Frederic Jones, a gentleman of leisure.

Shari Benstock, in her 1994 biography on Edith Wharton, notes that Edith also remembers the specific details of her childhood home. Aesthetic awareness was an early trait for Edith Jones, and she recounted the brownstone's "settings and furnishings—the low steps leading to a front vestibule painted in Pompeian red and trimmed with a frieze of stenciled leaves; the heavily draped white-and-gold drawing rooms where straight backed chairs cushioned in purple brocade stood at attention like sentinels along the walls..." (Benstock 4). Clearly, from early on in her life, Wharton was interested in the decoration and design of spaces.

In 1866, the family left their brownstone to travel abroad in Europe, escaping wartime economics in New York. It was in Rome, Italy, and France, that Edith developed a love for the European designs and styles. In Eleanor Dwight's article, "Wharton and Art," she discusses the lasting influence Europe had on Edith's writing and character development:

Impervious to the efforts in the post-Civil War period manifested in museum founding, art criticism, and exhibitions to create an artistic climate in America comparable to that in Europe, she extolled European art of the past in her early fiction, praising the Italian Baroque style and later French art and culture, while she scathingly criticized American aesthetic insensitivity. (182)

Edith found the dark drapes and straight backed chairs of her family's brownstone inferior to the crisp beauty of classic European design.

She also felt a deep personal response to the art that she found abroad. Cynthia Griffin Wolff comments in *A Feast of Words* (1977) that, "One thing was always clear to Wharton: good art must grow organically out of the deepest fathoms of the artist's own experience. [...] The artist's courage lies in his ability to plunge into these recesses and to confront his most secret self" (9). Even as a young girl, she recognized that the power of European architecture and art was found in society's response to it. Wolff comments that, "the deepest thing in all of her best work is, finally, her complex and compassionate understanding of human nature. She met the challenge of reaching into her own irreducible core of selfness and transmitting it into art" (Wolff 9). The trip inspired her to start making her own art, including designing homes.

Even before her trip to Europe, Edith was a creative girl. She had learned how to "make-up" imaginative stories from a neighbor in New York (Benstock 18). She continued to do this after moving abroad to record her travels and entertain herself in what was to her an intimidating social environment. Edith shunned the duties expected of her as a young society girl, and she couldn't find any way to relate to other girls her age. Instead, she spent time imagining herself into texts she enjoyed reading, most of which far exceeded the usual maturity level for girls her age. Benstock elaborates, "Her desire for language—whether Holy Writ, Renaissance sonnets, or

everyday vernacular—transgressed the boundaries of convention. Even at this early age, she was pulled between conforming to social codes and giving free reign to her powers of expression” (21). Storytelling, making up adventures, and eventually reading rather than socializing, grew into a love of literature that prompted her to begin writing.

A bout of typhoid, and the subsequent sicknesses associated with it, led Edith down more dark paths as she faced fever and possible death. These experiences added a grim side to her youthful imagination that eventually led her to write her ghost stories. However, it was after moving back to America, to Newport, that she started to explore life beyond the innocent education she had access to as a teen girl. She sought out more knowledge about birth, sex, and death but was often reproached by her prudish mother for asking such questions. Mature beyond her years and more knowledgeable than most young ladies, Edith Jones put reading and writing above the usual socializing and courting that were expected of her.

She did, at the age of 21, venture into romance during an intense friendship with a family relation named Walter Barry. It was one of Barry’s friends, however, that Edith eventually married. Edward “Teddy” Wharton had a rascalion sense of humor that Edith found attractive. They had a slow courtship before marrying in April of 1885. The couple quickly grew tired of the Newport social scene and decided to travel abroad. Edith Wharton enjoyed observing more than participating, as she analyzed varying cultures, studied foreign designs, and started turning her young imaginings into short novels and stories. Wharton made herself more onlooker than object to be looked at. She watched art and studied its power. This eventually led to her becoming an artisan when she began to design houses that suited her own definition of art. Martha Banta describes the value of Wharton’s observations in “Wharton’s Women: In Fashion, In History, Out of Time” (2003):



Her life and writings offer excellent notations on the ways in which women are affected by historical events, material changes, and shifts in social and legal matters, but her true subject is Time, not History. History provides the subtext and necessary background for her tales, but the alterations upon which historians concentrate come to Wharton's readers by means of subtle, oblique narrative references, reflected, as it were, in mirrors or by glimpses of city streets out distant windows. Wharton's imagination takes responsibility for recording the psychological relations between past, present, and future that impose themselves on the nerves and heartstrings of the women who populate her fictional world. (51-2)

Wharton had a critical eye for the beauty in art and the ability to transcribe it onto the page. It is this keen sense of observation that make her work valuable in studying and understanding old New York society through the eyes of a woman's firsthand experience.

Her eye for design developed into a hobby that eventually produced her famous showplace home, The Mount, which led to her European styles being adopted by new New York society. Wharton enjoyed buying old homes and refurbishing them, such as her first home with Teddy in America on Lenox Hill. Her love of architectural design eventually propelled her to write *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). Ann Jacobsen's article, "Edith Wharton's Houses Full of Rooms," supports the link between home decoration and character development:

Wharton redefines the interior life of women in her novels exploring the "true" nature of women as she redefined the interiors of houses in *The Decoration of Houses*. [...]

Because Wharton wrote a book on architecture and interior decorating and often treated these subjects in detail in her writing, looking at her work through architectural theory gives important insights into what she was doing. Wharton's houses and interiors often

provide vital information about her characters. [...]For Wharton, architecture and human interiority are closely related. Writing offers access to the inner world, but when readers encounter a house or room, they are moving into deeper levels of interiority still. (516-7)

Wharton's observation of design and the marriage market in her literary writing is rooted in her ability to recognize art and then use it in a purposeful way. She argues in *The Decoration of Houses* that usefulness is an important component of art (186) and education through exposure to art is a necessary part of the process by which a person can learn to contemplate art (173-78). This obsession with decorating and creating an artful space demonstrates that Wharton had the mind of a craftsman. In the course of her early years, Wharton transitions from being expected to comport herself as a work of art to actively designing her home and creating fiction—essentially, she went from being art to creating her own. This transition from her station of birth to one that she decided on, her recognition of the impact that art can have on people, and her own ability to design her own surroundings makes Wharton the epitome of an artisan figure.

Creativity allowed Wharton to escape the prison that her mother and father's inherited money forced upon her. As she began writing, Wharton incorporated the heavy influence of Europe in her personal style. Eleanor Dwight, in her article "Wharton and Art" (2003), makes the connection between Wharton's love for art and her writing clearer:

The effects of Wharton's early encounters with European art can be found in the artistic preferences that she gives to her characters, as well as the manner in which she describes them. In several of her works, Wharton uses the theme of portraiture to look into a character's nature. Her characters are often either sitting for an artist or conceiving of themselves as visual objects. Throughout her writing, Wharton carefully highlights the

physical appearance of her female characters and the importance that their society places on female beauty. (182)

In Wharton's novels and short stories, a character's interaction with the setting around her is important in understanding their personality and reasoning. Wharton remarks in *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), masters of realism know "each character first of all as a product of particular material and social conditions" (9). The way female characters interact with their material and social surroundings can help readers analyze and provide reason as to why one woman is allowed to live past the end of the novel and why another has to die before the conclusion.

These differences can be more succinctly expressed using the terms art and artisan. The important difference between an art (passive) and an artisan (active) is having an opinion and expressing it. Whereas a piece of art is an object solely meant to be looked at, an artisan figure makes the space around her more beautiful by considering her own opinion in the design of it. The character's interaction with a scene translates to their efficacy in the novel. A woman is categorized as art if she depends on a designed scene to make her feel beautiful.

Art finds purpose in being viewed by others. It prospers the most within a complimentary setting that enhances, or at least suits it. This type of woman is decoration as much as wife, because she is marketing herself as a work of art that a man would want to collect through marriage. On the contrary, a woman who can create the scene she situates herself in is an artisan. These women can participate in the action of any scene regardless of how it looks or what social class it belongs to; however, they are especially comfortable in the scenes that they create for themselves. Instead of existing as a beautiful work of art in hopes of selling themselves to the curating male, artisans can find a way to survive on their own by affecting change to the scene surrounding them. An artisan can make her personal space reflect her own style, will have a skill

in the job market or household, and will make her decisions with personal intent rather than for the sake of anyone watching her. However, both artisan and art characters must be considered woman in order for them to exist within this society at all.

This attempt at classification will only be applicable to the feminine gender. Both art and artisan female characters rely on the cultural identifiers of femaleness and beauty. Butler explains that the identification of a person's gender is:

[...] an enacted fantasy or incorporation, however, it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, act, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an enternal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principal of identity [...] Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal sign and other discursive means. (209)

These women must abide by a performative lifestyle dictated by cultural ideals. In order for these characters to be round and fully developed, Wharton knew that their identities, and her own as well, have been shaped by the social constructions of what signs identify a woman as a woman. Their gendered identities rely on how they are seen on the surface and how they interact with the opposite gender. Both artisan and art female archetypes are beholden to being identifiable as a woman in their surface appearance. They must perform the role of woman and adhere to the gestures, acts, and designs of their body in order to be labeled a woman by society. It is only after establishing their gender as woman that they can choose their type of feminine agency

within society. This means, first and foremost, that individuals must be obviously women for this system of character classification to work.

The following chapters will use three texts, spaced chronologically throughout Wharton's career, to analyze different female characters in various settings. Studying how these women interact with the settings can actually reveal how their stories will end. One woman's death, another's success, and even the winner of an argument can reveal the type of female character that Wharton was attempting to create. Her careful eye as an artist gives a greater sense of realism to the story. Butler, in her article "Giving an Account of Oneself" (2001), explains, "There is the operation of a norm, invariable social, that conditions what will and will not be a recognizable account" (26). The characters must retain their historical accuracy and be easily identifiable as women, in a certain type of society, in a specific time period, in order for them to represent a realistic feminine character type. Each character's development reveals that Wharton was an artisan who took joy in creating each detail of her miniature worlds in order to more fully engage the reader.

## CHAPTER 2

*The House of Mirth*

Published in 1905, *The House of Mirth* explores the role of women, the marriage market, and the changing social landscape of American high society. The protagonist, Lily Bart, acts as a piece of art in an attempt to enter a marriage market that she doesn't necessarily embrace but must nevertheless enter. As with all works of art, Lily relies on other people and the scenery surrounding her to define her self and her purpose. Amy Kaplan, in her book *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988), comments:

Lily's desire for aloofness depends upon her attachment to the setting from which she wishes to be distinguished. Throughout the novel, Lily's identity is described in relation to a background against which she can outline herself, or a mirror in which she can be viewed. Yet each attempt to ignore that dependence contributes to her further decline.

(91)

Lily Bart is struggling to find a place in her inherited but alienating society. She suffers, ultimately, from the need to be surrounded by beautiful objects and be seen as an art object by other characters.

We first see Lily through Selden's eyes at the busy train station. Lily stands apart from the scenery surrounding her, looking out of place among the other passengers. When she turns and smiles at him, Selden comments that he "had never seen her more radiant. Her vivid head relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room, and under her dark hat and veil she regained the girlish smoothness, the purity of tint, that she was beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing" (*House* 5-6).

Through Selden's eyes, the reader sees what appears to be Lily's true form. Here she stands out, merely because it provides a blurry background for her to shine against. She is veiled in a darker

fabric that gives just a hint of the face beneath. Selden even admits to himself that he “was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay” (*House* 7). With this veiling, Lily blurs into a perfected and artificial image of woman.

Relying on the limited generosity of her aunt, Mrs. Julia Peniston, Lily has to search for marriage in a hope to maintain the lifestyle she enjoys. Lily is often conscious of her surroundings, especially when others are looking at her. She comments that she was “not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required” (*House* 23). In well-constructed and delicate details of “harmonious porcelain and silver, a handful of violets in slender glass,” Lily finds herself a part of the scene, as “[t]here was nothing new to Lily in these tokens of studied luxury, but, though they formed a part of her atmosphere, she never lost her sensitiveness to their charm. Mere display left her with a sense of superior distinction; but she felt an affinity to all the subtler manifestations of wealth” (*House* 34). By surrounding herself with opulence, Lily is making sure that, like a grand painting, her backdrop is complimenting her beauty. In this way, Lily becomes an element of a scene, and she is put into the room like a framed mural.

Her affinity for a well-decorated scene becomes most apparent when Lily takes part in the *tableaux vivants* that are hosted by the rich Welly Brys. Lily dresses herself in the fashion of Mrs. Lloyd, the subject of a well-known and beautifully sensual painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds. In the *art nouveau* style, the figure of Mrs. Lloyd is veiled in a white curtain of loose yet clingy fabric and surrounded by delicate flowers while carving her husband’s name in a tree. This image of pure femininity, which shows affectionate dedication to a husband while she’s surrounded by gentle blooms, is an infatuating scene for any male onlooker. In this setting, Lily

literally becomes a work of art. Lawrence Selden, an accumulator of art, and Lily's love interest in the book, sees Lily in this setting and thinks that she is now the truest version of herself, as "[i]ts expression was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part" (*House* 106). Lily is only seen as being a real woman, paradoxically, when she poses herself as a work of inanimate art.

Her dressing is just as important as the backdrop which she is seen against. Lily is more often being viewed, rather than looking at others. The most honest opinions of her seem to come from those who watch her. In Emily J. Orlando's book, *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts* (2007), she discusses the concept of being seen:

Wharton's response to the role that spectacular pictures of women played in her culture—a response most clearly articulated in the *tableaux vivants* scene of book 1—suggests a function that extends beyond titillation. That is, Wharton lets her Lily manipulate the power of imaging to her advantage by overseeing her objectification as a work of art. (55)

Selden especially notes the beauty of Lily, but always against a well-designed backdrop, such as a landscape, a setting sun, the images of a painting, the blurry tint of a crowd, and even the art that decorates his own house. Selden thinks, "Lily had no real intimacy with nature, but she had a passion for the appropriate and could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background of her own sensations" (*House* 51). She sets herself in contrast to, or as a part of, the scenery in order to evoke a certain air, and in this way, she is making herself into a work of art that a man would want to collect. Orlando explains that "[t]he woman's position as model and object of art is underscored by the fact that he is guiding her to create a painting that is his image



of her” (54). Lily styles herself intentionally to influence the way men view her. In hopes of attracting a husband, Lily is displaying herself in a style that is deliberately meant to please a rich man’s eye. She is passively entering the marriage market by reflecting the styles that are popular at the time rather than creating her own space intended to make her happy, instead of the men looking at her.

On the other hand, there are women in the novel, from varying social classes, with lifestyles that they have actively created to reflect their own personality regardless of cultural trends. Being art or deciding to be active in the creation of it determines a female character’s success or failure within the higher social class systems. There are a few characters, like Mrs. Peniston, that navigate this class as an artisan figure. She and Gerty Farrish, an acquaintance of Lily, make their homes to suit themselves. These two characters, although separated by age, social status, and personality, live a life of looking—rather than being looked at. They survey the situations of others and make decisions for themselves.

Gerty works with charitable organizations and has an open heart that values the feeling of others (regardless of their class) above her own. She takes care of people less fortunate, even though she has considerably less money than either Lily or Mrs. Peniston. Gerty’s house is full of her own crafts. She has made the house to suit her, rather than rely on the house’s décor to determine her sense of self. Mrs. Peniston also frames herself in a home to her liking, one that she cleans and cares for, makes decisions in the management of, and decorates to her own tastes regardless of what designs are in vogue. She creates the space to suit herself, rather than follow any rules of what is in style, as Lily often laments. It is important to note that Mrs. Peniston and Gerty have separated themselves from the marriage market. Both are making decisions outside of the market constructions, as Ms. Peniston is a content widow and Gerty has resigned herself to

never being married. There are stipulating sacrifices that they have made in order to be free to create their own space.

While Lily is the object being seen, her aunt is an onlooker who takes pleasure in watching the goings-on of the social circles, the weddings, the dress styles, and the traffic outside of her manicured mansion. Julia Peniston was born into old money. The narrator says, “This connection with the well-fed and industrious stock of early New York revealed itself in the glacial neatness of Mrs. Peniston’s drawing-room and in the excellence of her cuisine. [...] She had always been a looker-on at life” (*House* 32). Mrs. Peniston has surrounded herself with what she likes, her house reflects the style of her dress, but the “glacial” and dark style of it is oppressive to Lily. There isn’t much color variety, and large gaudy statues fill the house. Mrs. Peniston dresses in shiny jet black to show mourning for her late husband. This darkness, like the walls of the house and the color of the carpet, make the home feel suffocating for Lily’s light and airy personality. More significantly, Lily doesn’t like it because the house is not a flattering backdrop for *her* beauty.

Mrs. Peniston has not created the home to be a background for herself or Lily. Instead, it functions as a kind of sanctuary that exists outside the drama and gaudiness of new New York. Lily, when she first moved into her aunt’s home “had fancied at first that it would be easy to draw her aunt into the whirl of her own activities, but there was a static force in Mrs. Peniston against which her niece’s efforts spent themselves in vain. To attempt to bring her into active relation with life was like tugging at a piece of furniture which has been screwed to the floor” (*House* 2). Mrs. Peniston takes an active role in maintaining the home that she has crafted to suit her own tastes, rather than acquiescing to the demands of society.

She also likes to keep her home clean. Every October “represented to Mrs. Peniston the domestic equivalent of a religious retreat” (*House* 78). Taking pride in her personal space, Mrs. Peniston goes through “the linen and blankets in the precise spirit of the penitent exploring the inner folds of conscience; she sought for moths as the stricken soul seeks for lurking infirmities” (*House* 78). This deep clean brings all of the hidden secrets out of the closets, and Mrs. Peniston inspects and cleans to her personal satisfaction. This task of cleaning the dark walnut floors and draping the furniture in heavy white drop cloths seems indelicate to Lily because the lifestyle she prefers would have these chores done for her year around. She doesn’t care how it gets done, but she believes it should be done by someone like the charwoman, Mrs. Haffen, whom Lily detests seeing but is forced to face. Lily abhors the house “in its state of unnatural immaculateness and order, [it] was as dreary as a tomb, and as Lily, turning from her brief repast between shrouded side-boards, wandered into the newly uncovered glare of the drawing room she felt as though she were buried alive in the stifling limits of Mrs. Peniston’s existence” (*House* 79). Removed from complimentary backgrounds and forced to live surrounded by the evidence of cleaning, makes Lily feel lost. Kaplan argues, “the chief ornament, the lady, does not preside, but she yields herself to a commercial stereotype of the woman of the house only to find her identity dwarfed and effaced by the objects around her” (77).

It is argued by Linda Watts in her article, “The Bachelor Girl and the Body Politic” (2007), that Lily’s downfall at the end of the text can actually be sourced back to her lack of a domestic space to make her own. Watts comments that “the chief appeal of *The House of Mirth*’s fictional genre, the novel of manners, consists of the central female character’s quest for domestic mastery, a narrative goal typically constructed as the struggle to conduct herself according to gendered protocol, marry a man of suitable socioeconomic status, and culminate her

quest by setting up housekeeping for her family. Within these terms, a proper woman shall rule the domestic realm or die trying. As a consequence, novels of manners typically conclude in one of two ways for the central female protagonist: marital triumph or merciful death” (187). Watts agrees that Lily’s failure to create her own space, either through marriage to someone or by working to pay for an apartment, directly corresponds to her eventual death. Lily’s lack of a third space that she can design and have autonomy over does result in her inability to find her true self. Unlike Mrs. Peniston, Lily suffers from a lack of a space to call her own.

Mrs. Peniston is naturally more comfortable in her space because of the way it looks. Mrs. Peniston designed a third space that she finds beautiful and is happy within so it syncs with her femininity. Lily is only borrowing a room within the house, so she doesn’t have the ability to make decisions regarding design, and her identity becomes lost within the decorations that were dictated by someone besides herself. She lives in a home surrounded by Mrs. Peniston’s preferences, so Lily can’t artistically situate herself among the decadent new art of luxury that she prefers. Mrs. Peniston’s sense of space does not fit Lily or the popular ideal of what is beautiful.

In the same way that Mrs. Peniston has crafted her own scene to reflect herself rather than social expectations, Gerty decorates her own meager, but warm and welcoming, home to suit her personality. Gerty’s little flat “sparkled with welcome when Seldon entered it. Its modest ‘effects,’ compact of enamel paint and ingenuity, spoke to him in the language just then sweetest to his ear” (*House* 122). The home that Gerty has designed is pleasing to Seldon, her cousin, when he visits her. He observes the small decorations and admires her talent for making a meal with her own hands. Seldon also notes that Gerty “sparkled too; or at least shone with a tempered

radiance” (*House* 122). In the space she designed, Gerty sets the scene—not to flaunt luxurious design, but rather to depict her hospitable character.

Soon after Selden “complimented [Gerty] on the ingenuity with which she had utilized every inch of her small quarters” (*House* 122), however, he wants to talk about Lily, and Gerty realizes that she was just a means of getting information. Even if Selden enjoyed her space, he has his attention caught on a popular piece of art. Gerty knows that her home is less luxurious than Lily’s preferred standard of living, but Gerty takes pride in creating her home to suit her own preferences, just as Mrs. Peniston chooses to do. This pride and autonomy, however, won’t win her a man’s attention in the time period she lives in. After Selden leaves, Gerty takes note of her space, and she “cried quietly as she undressed, laying aside her clothes with her habitual precision, setting everything in order for the next day” because she has to wake up and attend “an appointment early the next morning with a district visitor in the East side” (*House* 128). Unlike Lily, Gerty reacts to the stresses of her life with a stoic spirit that keeps her moving forward and doing the job that she must to survive. The enjoyment she finds in her third space provides her with the beauty she prefers and the sense of power she needs to have drive in her life. This same mentality gives her strength when Lily comes to her door in the middle of the night seeking comfort and help. Even though Gerty has to be up early for work, she shows hospitality and responds calmly to Lily’s needs.

Lily starts to decline as she is pushed outside of her familiar social circles, but Gerty keeps track of Lily and tries to help her find a job, a purpose for moving forward. Their positions become switched as Lily finds herself poor and her reputation tarnished beyond repair. No longer sleeping at night, and not surrounded by her accustomed luxuries and friends, Lily now looks tired beyond her years, and is not the image of youth and purity that Selden first saw in the train

station. Gerty, Lily's current viewer, had a "startled perception of the change in [Lily's] face—of the way in which an ashen daylight seemed suddenly to extinguish its artificial brightness" (*House* 208). As Lily rushes to leave Gerty's apartment and tells Gerty not to worry about her ramblings, she checks her reflection in a small wall mirror. This time, while viewing her own self, with the backdrop of Gerty's humble flat, Lily adjusts "her hair with a light hand, drawing down her veil, and giving a dexterous touch to her furs" (*House* 208). After viewing herself, she immediately has to draw down another veil to obscure the truth of what lies behind the sheer covering.

Lily now knows that she has to find work in order to keep a small apartment, or she will have to go to a boarding house or live, through Gerty's generosity, on her small flat's couch. She realizes that she has been "naturally fitted to dominate any situation in which she found herself, she vaguely imagined that such gifts would be of value to seekers after social guidance; but there was unfortunately no specific head under which the art of saying and doing the right thing could be offered on the market" (*House* 208-9). Lily takes a millinery job, but fails at actually doing the work. She doesn't have the skills or will to learn. In the industrial New York world, outside of her accustomed class's luxuries, she does not have a marketable skill to help her survive with dignity. She no longer holds a value in the marriage market either. The story ends with Lily finally succumbing to the deep sleep she has been augmenting with sleeping pills. It is in sleep that Lily becomes truly art. Her motionless body, framed by the bed, is a tableau of women's lives at the time.

The settings in Wharton's novels and short stories can reveal whether a character is an active or static type of woman. As an art form, Lily enters into a setting that has been designed by someone else. When Lily lives in the boardinghouse, the scene around her reveals just how

much her inner beauty relied on a luxurious surrounding to help her flourish. Watts observes, “Wharton’s novel shows the integral relationship between individual and milieu by demonstrating how a character’s social consciousness receives its shape and structure through encounters with the built environment, in itself forged in the image of societal convention” (190) Lily is limited by the structure surrounding her. The room she rents is stark, and Lily feels the depth of that starkness reflected in her own life. She can tap into her beauty only when showcased as a work of art in a setting that compliments her. However, characters like Gerty can mingle between one social setting and another, between formal weddings and social work, with ease. Gerty’s active lifestyle of helping others and working to support herself show her ability to adapt to multiple scenes. As an artisan, she is function as well as form. Mrs. Peniston also lives according to her own will. Even though she dies in the novel, she passes away from old age, in a space she designed. She also demonstrates power when she uses her will to dictate what happens to her home and belongings after death.

Lily’s passivity regarding the marriage market leads to her falling out of favor with her social class, living a life in squalor, and eventually dying from an overdose rather than being able to learn a marketable skill. Her heavy reliance on being seen as art by others cripples her ability to move beyond the social class that she was born into. In contrast, Mrs. Peniston and Gerty both actively create their own spaces, make decisions that affect their lives and the lives of others, and they make these decisions without regard for the marriage market’s rules. It is Lily’s inability to accept a life outside of the marriage market that is eventually her undoing. She focuses on the market as her only source of power because it provides a complimentary backdrop to her artistic form. However, like Ms. Peniston and Gerty, she does have the option to completely remove herself from the market and try to redefine herself based on her own concepts of beauty rather

than die living in the squalor of a rented room that someone else had designed. Lily is unable to step outside of the society she was born into, and her inability to see the beauty to be found in a life outside of that society makes her character limited to the confined framing of the text while the reader can imagine other characters living out their lives beyond the ending. She cannot exist beyond the end of it.



## CHAPTER 3

*The Custom of the Country*

Edith Wharton's life transformed from a young girl being raised as an art figure in a social world, to an artisan as she began to create stories and design homes. She actively appreciated art while also creating it. She designed spaces with a personal definition of beauty developed during her European travels. Her stories always discuss the beauty to be found in different forms of art. She used her writing to gain marketable power and establish herself as a valuable resource. When a woman realizes how she can use art for the purpose of fulfilling her own ambitions, with a disregard for the socially constructed aesthetics of her class, she becomes an *artisan*.

A rendering of the artisan archetype can be found in Wharton's 1913 novel, *The Custom of the Country*. The story centers on Undine Spragg, a Midwestern young girl just entering into the proper age for socializing. Undine has the skill of an imitator. In her small hometown of Apex, Undine's "chief delight was to 'dress up' in her mother's Sunday skirt and 'play lady' before the wardrobe mirror" (22). Undine performs the role of an onlooker and the artwork being looked at. This duality makes her a creator as well as a piece of artwork. As an artisan, she continues to explore the forms that art can take, and soon her mother pales in comparison to other images Undine can copy. Undine always "wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met" (Custom 19). Wharton moved to explore new art in Europe when she found the need for different inspiration in design. In much the same way, Undine moves to New York and integrates herself into old New York society. Undine sees the need in building a firm foundation by starting at the bottom and working her way into society by manipulating the marriage market. Carol Sapora critiques Undine's morality and imitation of this higher social class in her article "Undine Spragg, the

Mirror and the Lamp in *The Custom of The Country*” (2007). Sapora describes Undine’s entrance into New York society by relating Undine to a mirror. “She copies the people she envies who have the things she imagines she wants, but like a mirror, she reflects only the surface image: the dresses, gestures, even the desires” (Sapora 274). Undine confirms this when she remarks to her first husband, Ralph, “I want what... others want” (*Custom* 100). She seeks gain with her marriage to Ralph Marvell, who is a member of old New York’s society by birth. His family was once, but is no longer, of financial significance. However, the marriage to Ralph is a step toward higher regard and finances for Undine because his family’s reputation still allows Undine to enter into the New York social circuit.

Shortly after their marriage, Undine becomes increasingly unhappy with their financial situation. Her lack of satisfaction with her social station still continues after she gives birth to Paul. Undine does not show any sign of the expected motherly affection, and Paul restricts her extravagant social life. As she feels an even greater need to transcend her current social state, Undine begins to realize the swiftly changing landscape of New York high class has left her behind. Sapora succinctly explains the effect of this social ambition on Undine’s morality. “[Undine] does not imitate the spirit, the intellect, or the sensitivity of the ideal woman, only her appearance. The company she is most drawn to is the ‘sham’ society, those with privilege and opportunity but untroubled by thought or social concern. The result, though aesthetically brilliant, is not morally appealing” (274). Undine copies other women, friends and rivals alike, until she can surpass them when she “catches a glimpse of larger opportunities” (*Custom* 280). Then, she’ll do whatever she needs to in order to ascend to the next level of social standing, even if that means forsaking her morals.

Undine's true intentions start to show when she poses for a painting by a socially-admired artist, Mr. Claud Walsingham Poppo. She is dressed for "the sitting in something faint and shining, above which the long curves of her neck looked dead white in the cold light of the studio; and her hair, all a shadowless rosy gold, was starred with a hard glitter of diamonds" (*Custom* 156). She is sitting for her portrait after having given birth to a son, Paul, seemingly by supernatural means, as his conception and her pregnancy is only vaguely alluded to in the novel. Peter Van Deegan, an attractively masculine man with a gruff sense of propriety who is married to Ralph's cousin, Clare, is also present for the painting's unveiling. Van Deegan comments that the purpose of a woman's portrait is for it to be pleasing to look at. "Hang it, [...] the great thing in a man's portrait is to catch the likeness—we all know that; but with a woman's it's different—a woman's picture has got to be pleasing. Who wants it about if it isn't" (*Custom* 160). Along the same lines, a woman requires attractive qualities in order to succeed in the marriage market. Undine knows this and employs it to her advantage. At a ball, she wears a dress that looks reminiscent of "Empress Josephine, after the Prudhon portrait at the Louvre" (*Custom* 162), to again display herself as a work of art. Like Lily Bart, Undine deliberately mimics a painting following the art nouveau style in order to be seen as a work of art by anyone looking at her.

Wharton, like Undine, was also conscious of the shift from old to new money. From a family that is said to be the inspiration for "keeping up with the Joneses" (Benstock 4), Wharton knew how being from old money differed from the nouveau riche scene that started to take over New York. Undine reflects on her lack of foresight when marrying Ralph:

During the three years since her marriage she had learned to make distinctions unknown to her girlish categories. She had found out that she had given herself to the exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous; that she was in

the case of those who have cast in their lot with a fallen cause, [...] Apex ideals had been based on the myth of “old families” ruling New York from a throne of Revolutionary tradition, with the new millionaires paying them feudal allegiance. But experience has long since proved the delusiveness of the simile. (*Custom* 158)

She realizes now that marrying Ralph was a hindrance to her ever being able to rise socially. The old families were failing, and newly acquired money was starting to become fashionable. Undine is clearly aware of these shifting economic sands. She even comments on the future belonging to the “showy and the promiscuous,” and she seems to put this idea into action when she decides to escape motherhood’s tethers by traveling abroad to Europe, alone. Undine’s rebellious nature is reinforced by her actions. A woman traveling alone and leaving her child and husband behind was certainly uncommon for the time period. This is the first sign that Undine’s character extends beyond the art or craft archetypes to become someone with more power.

Once in Europe, Undine begins an affair with Peter Van Degen. Unlike Ralph, Peter belongs to New York’s nouveau riche class. He acquired (as opposed to inherited) his fortune and is therefore more welcomed into the new New York social circuit. His wealth and reputation are new and fresh, and this step up in society is very attractive to Undine. Again breaking socially-accepted fashion, Undine divorces Ralph in order to marry Peter. However, their marriage does not happen because Peter loses interest in Undine and claims that he is unable to get a divorce.

At the time of publishing, Wharton was herself going through a divorce from Teddy. Ticien Marie Sassoubre comments on the timing of the novel and Wharton’s own divorce in the article “Property and Identity in *The Custom of the Country*” (2003). She discusses the critical responses of the novel that were heavily influenced by the corresponding events in Wharton’s

life. Sassoubre writes, “As a result, *The Custom of the Country* is consistently read as a novel about divorce, or a critique of the patriarchal oppression of women. [...] I argue that *The Custom of the Country* should be read as a novel about changing property relations and the ways in which those property relations are constitutive of personal identity” (687). Sassoubre believes Undine’s character is formed by her actions within the marriage market. Undine sees the commodification of women as property and decides to take advantage of the social situation to advance herself. Regardless of the social bias toward divorce, Wharton and Undine both did as they saw fit to suit their situation and personal needs.

Her scandalous reputation as a divorcee forces Undine out of her position in society. She travels for a few years and seems to be making plans to re-ascend the social ladder. When living in Paris again, Undine becomes reacquainted with Raymond de Chelles, a French count, whom she had met on her first trip to Paris. However, Raymond’s happiness at seeing her again seems to be different and more intimate than their first meeting. “Undine, at an earlier stage in her career, might not have known exactly what the difference signified; [...] [b]ut Undine’s increased experience, if it had made her more vigilant, had also given her a clearer measure of her power” (*Custom* 287). Undine has learned that her beauty and sexual attractiveness gives her power. Raymond, as she predicts, falls in love with her, but as a Catholic, he cannot marry a divorcee. Undine puts a plan into action to blackmail Ralph, for the funds to bribe the Pope for an annulment, by threatening to take Paul (as Undine does have custody of her son but could not be bothered to travel to Europe with him in tow).

Undine is willing to use her son as leverage. Sassoubre comments that, “For Undine, both physical objects and interpersonal relationships are merely the instruments of those goals. As in the free market, goods and people have value for her only insofar as they are either scarce or

necessary to the attainment of her goals—she has no sense of intrinsic value” (695-6). The relationships of mother and son, or father and son, have different meanings (from the usually implied attachments of love) for Undine. She considers all relationships for the market value they hold. While this raises Undine in social prosperity, it also reveals a negative side for women who function as artisans during this strict time period. Ignoring social conventions for their own prosperity means disregarding the feelings of others involved in these transactions. Undine doesn't worry about the effect this ploy has on Ralph or Paul, only the outcome for herself.

Ralph scrambles to get the money together by borrowing from family and making a business deal with Elmer Moffat, who is an acquaintance of Undine's from her small hometown of Apex. Elmer had also moved to New York for the job market there. After the business deal doesn't go through in time to make Undine's deadline, Elmer reveals that he eloped with Undine years earlier and then they divorced. This news, and his belief that he would lose his son, devastates Ralph, and he commits suicide. His death actually benefits Undine, who can now marry Raymond because she is a widow (and her earlier marriage to Elmer is still a secret).

Soon, Undine again loses interest in marriage as Raymond's social position stagnates at a social level with no promise of future prosperity. The de Chelles are aristocrats who have their fortune tied up in material objects rather than liquid assets. She aspires to keep moving up the ladder, and she needs ready cash to do so. She divorces Raymond, moves out of the French countryside, and seeks out Elmer, who had been an industrious and profitable business man as he acquired a fortune and earned a spot in the new New York society. Thus, she returns to her first (and perhaps her most suited) love. However, the novel ends with Undine reading a newspaper article saying that an old acquaintance, Jim Driscoll, had been appointed the Ambassador to

England. She has a “vague vision” of all the grand events Jim and his wife were now attending, and imagines a new scheme:

But under all the dazzle a tiny black cloud remained. 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; and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that is was the one part she was really made for. (408-9)

Marrying an ambassador would be a new part for Undine to perform—one that she very much desires.

Throughout the novel, she keeps marrying to increase her value rather than marrying for love. Beverly R. Voloshin compares Undine to a young male entrepreneur in her article, “Exchange in Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country*” (1987). Voloshin says that Undine, if male, would have been respected for her financial wit. She writes:

“[Undine] moves through and up in the social world by her marriages, those exchanges of herself which she negotiates. A businessman selling a product or making a deal must generally create an atmosphere of confidence and so in a sense must sell himself, as we see Moffatt do during the brief revelations of his business dealings with Ralph Marvell; but more than any businessman, Undine must sell herself. She is her own capital and the aura of that capital, her own broker, her own market. Thus in Undine’s career, as in the opening hotel scene, home and market, private and public, self and commodity are thoroughly and shockingly interfused” (100-1).

The idea of marrying an ambassador is her seeking the thrill of a new, more profitable, sales venture. Undine has not only turned herself into a profitable commodity, she also functions as the saleswoman, reaping all profits from each transaction.

Undine utilizes a room and conversations with others to make herself an attractive member of the marriage market. As a self-created work of art, Undine knows how to use a scene to compliment her beauty, such as her dress when she sits for a portrait. In her attempts to rise socially, Undine starts to use this skill of becoming a piece of art—just as Lily attempts to do. She designs herself to reflect popular fashions, creates a home, has a child, and stays socially active. This deliberate manipulation of the marriage market to better her status in society is a purposeful use of the aesthetics and art of a culture. Undine has transcended the art archetype by actively creating herself into marketable artwork. With the intent to do more and have more, Undine has realized the value in a woman's beauty. Her looks serve the purpose of advancing her financially and socially. Undine is an artisan because of her skill at transforming herself with the purpose to financially prosper from it.

Like Undine, Wharton knows that a background can complement the subject. Dwight supports that Wharton uses strategic description to create a proper setting based on the character's personality:

By the time she finished *The House of Mirth* three years later, she had mastered the art of arranging fictional elements—background and foreground, characters, settings, and details—into a happier relation to each other. In later works, she describes settings with great care, but the details of dress and decoration that she so carefully employed to make her historical novel authentic are articulated with a lighter hand. One scene she became adept at evoking was a kind of sumptuous spectacle, in which the main character is



pictured among a collection of people, all situated before an imposing building, creating a tableau like the other Italian paintings she had observed by such talents as Giovanni Bellini or Vittore Carpaccio or the rituals of government and church she had described in her first novel. (190)

Wharton took care to properly convey each character's personality by thoroughly describing their response to a scene. The background includes imagery that hints at a character's desires and personality.

Undine and Lily both know the importance of setting a complimentary scene. Lily will dress herself like a painting to be seen as art, but Undine will have herself painted as a portrait, essentially dictating how she will be represented as art. Lily's more passive role is what stops her from succeeding, whereas Undine's very active role, in creating herself as art and actually following through with multiple marriages, makes Undine the more powerful figure. Her success comes from the artisan ability to create, perform, and manipulate herself into a valuable commodity within the marriage market.

## CHAPTER 4

## Short Story Application: "Roman Fever"

"Roman Fever," a short story published in *Liberty* magazine in 1934, looks at the characterization of two women, Grace Ansley and Alida Slade, who are occasional friends and rivals. While Mrs. Slade is revealing a secret from years before, Mrs. Ansley is steadily knitting and crafting the best way to respond to Mrs. Slade. They are surrounded by the scenery of Rome as they reflect on their time spent there as younger, unmarried women. Mrs. Slade reveals how she used the setting to exact vengeance years ago. However, Mrs. Ansley extends the discussion beyond the confines of Rome to explain how she chose for herself, had a child, and built a life back in New York, without any regard for society's expectations or her friend's knowledge.

Their discussion addresses the marriage market as it pertains to their husbands and their respective lives in New York, but as a short story, it of course does not do this as clearly or in such detail as the two previous texts. "Roman Fever" is important to this discussion of women, marriage, and art because it demonstrates that the terms can still be applied to characters who are not placed within homes or spaces belonging to a specific social circle or class. Wai-chee Dimock discusses the relationship between the marketplace, individual power, and exchange in the article "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*." Dimock observes the power of exchange in regard to *The House of Mirth*, but it is as equally applicable here, that, "Properly managed, even revenge can become a form of exchange. [...] The past wrongs are to be set right by a little 'adjustment' between the two women in the form of a 'private transaction,' a 'transfer of property'" (133). In the same way that the marriage market and social conventions regarding art influence actions in the previous two texts discussed, "Roman Fever" shows how a conversation between two women can be seen as an economic transaction or exercise of power. Dimock agrees, "On the whole, Wharton is interested less in the etiology of power than in the

way power comports itself, in the mode and manner of its workings. She is most interested, that is to say, in the mediated and socialized forms of power, power that women do enjoy and that they use skillfully and sometimes brutally” (126). The women observe social niceties and even joke about their daughters before subtly transitioning into a seemingly calm, yet intensely personal, discussion. Their real conversation begins as they admire the scenic view of the Forum and Palatine Hill in Rome and discuss the stereotypical conventions of old ladies knitting.

Mrs. Slade brings up a letter from when they, as young girls, were in Rome. When she found out that Mrs. Ansley was flirting with Delphin (Mrs. Slade’s current husband), Mrs. Slade writes a letter pretending to be Delphin. She requests Mrs. Ansley to meet at the Coliseum after dark. The letter was intended to have Mrs. Ansley venture into the Coliseum and perhaps catch Roman Fever, which is more commonly known as malaria. In an attempt to claim victory, Mrs. Slade actually reveals her attempted murder of Mrs. Ansley. After years of keeping the deception, she finally reveals it to Mrs. Ansley. Mrs. Slade believes that she has affected decisions that Mrs. Ansley made in the past. However, Mrs. Ansley has determined her own fate without the consideration, inclusion, or acknowledgment of her friend or old New York’s social constructions. Mrs. Ansley wrote back to Delphin (the real one this time) and had him meet her there to have an affair. She didn’t hold to codes of modesty expected of her sex or class. Instead, she chose to do what made her happy.

Rachel Bowlby, in her article “I Had Barbara:,” explains, “In going over the story again and finding hitherto unnoticed indications of what happened—the old story that the current story brings out—we are in the same position as the two women characters. They find themselves engaged in a process of reinterpretation and reconstruction as they go back over the events of twenty-five years before, as well as over their subsequent views of the other” (39). Readers only

have the two young girls and a waiter through which to see and judge the two women. With limited onlookers, we are left with our own inferences to interpret the events. Also, the reader has to solely rely on what the two women recall about the situation when they were younger in order to gauge each character's trustworthiness and accuracy of events.

Although the reader only gets hints about what happened back in New York since their trip to Rome as teenage girls, readers can assume that the two women remained somewhat civil and socializing associates as they are now, years later, still traveling together. The secret was kept and their relationship left intact. Although Mrs. Slade hid away the truth of the false letter, she believed that she had created a scene in Rome that resulted in her winning her husband from her friend. Also, Mrs. Ansley travelled for some time to conceal being pregnant, but Mrs. Slade thought that the ruse played out successfully and Mrs. Ansley had become sick from going to the Coliseum. The hidden plot twist is revealed at the end of the story when Mrs. Ansley simply says "I had Barbara" ("Roman Fever" 452). Once she has suggested that Barbara is Delphin's and her daughter, Mrs. Ansley has won the battle.

Regardless of the social rules about having children out of wedlock and not going to the Coliseum after nightfall, Mrs. Ansley did go and she did have a child with Delphin. Even more, she managed to enter the marriage market and become just as successful as Mrs. Slade has in her marriage to Delphin. Neither marriage may be happy per se, but both women are financially and socially successful.

As she keeps this information to herself until the moment it will have the most impact, Mrs. Ansley calmly continues to knit rather than confronting Mrs. Slade. She is physically crafting and creating a useful product as she is also mentally crafting a response that will let her win the argument. At the beginning of the story, their daughters alluded to the act of knitting as

the only thing that their mothers could be doing in Rome with all their free time. The comment is meant to underscore their advanced age. Mrs. Ansley responds to the comment with her actions when “[h]alf guilty she drew from her handsomely mounted black hand-bag a twist of crimson silk run through by two fine knitting needles” (“Roman Fever” 438-9). She responds by doing the thing that the girls made fun of her for and reveals a rebellious and active spirit in doing so. Regardless of the joke, Mrs. Ansley becomes a more artisan figure as she rebels against the stereotype and continues to knit because the craft makes her happy. Alice Petry offers that thorough analysis of this quote and Ansley’s character in her article, “‘A twist of crimson silk’: Edith Wharton’s ‘Roman Fever.’” Petry remarks:

A major rupture in the stereotype is the simple fact that (the daughters’ remarks notwithstanding) Alida Slade does not knit at all. This unexpected situation focuses the reader’s attention more intensely on Grace Ansley, whose apparently passionate devotion to knitting ultimately will enable us to probe the psyches of both women and to reconstruct the remarkable events of a generation before. (164)

Mrs. Ansley only stops knitting when she stands up to reveal the plot’s twist. The craft of knitting becomes a way to focus her mind and keep her emotions occupied on a task while she listens and carefully thinks about how to respond. Mrs. Slade believes that the story she is telling holds power over Mrs. Ansley. Instead, Mrs. Ansley made the decision to go to the Coliseum, wrote to the real Delphin telling him to meet her, regardless of the social stigma of going to see a young, engaged, man at night. She took the risk because it made her happy.

Both women survive beyond the end of the short story, but Mrs. Ansley seems to be the winner of the discussion as she has the final rejoinder and reveals the twist at the end. Mrs. Slade can be seen as an art figure because of her passive confrontation of Mrs. Ansley and appreciation

of the appropriate Roman scene (one that reflects other historical debates) surrounding them. Mrs. Slade also does not knit, indicating that she is aware of what the girls think of an old woman that knits and she is trying to refute the negative stereotype. While Mrs. Ansley dared to venture to the Coliseum at night, Mrs. Slade simply writes a letter in an attempt to affect change—one that ultimately fails. Mrs. Ansley's steady knitting and her limited but powerful replies may seem passive, but it is revealed that her mind is contemplating the course of their exchange, and she knows that the decisions she made in youth actively ignored social conventions. She conscientiously makes her decisions based on her own desires, even waiting to reply until the opportune moment that will deal the most efficient blow. Mrs. Slade, on the other hand, fails to conceive (so to speak) that it was possible for Mrs. Ansley to ignore propriety and the letter. Her obligations to social constructions did not consider that Mrs. Ansley might have gone to go to the Coliseum and met with Delphin, much less conceive a child out of wedlock.

Both Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Peniston, from *The House of Mirth*, have the ability to end a discussion, create a space for themselves, break stereotypes, and make their decisions outside of social conventions. They have the power to create their own setting and guide the progression of the plot. For Mrs. Ansley, the Coliseum, her home, and even her marriage have been her decisions. Each decision has moved her forward in life, similar to Undine, and helped her create a space in which she is comfortable. Her literal creation of a craft by knitting and the way she designs her own life makes Mrs. Ansley more akin to an artisan figure than Mrs. Slade. It would be important, with further application, to determine if the artisan will always win even the most minor of victories over the art figure in any of Wharton's stories.

## CHAPTER 5

## Modern Applications: Conclusion

Edith Wharton was a keen observer of the woman's plight during the height of the marriage market at the turn of the twentieth century. Having lived in the system, she had a critical eye for conflicts between women and man, women and society, women and themselves, and women and power. These conflicts and how a character handles them can determine a character's success or failure, perhaps even life or death, by the end of the story.

Analyzing Wharton's characters based on studying their interaction with art may provide a way to interpret why they fail or succeed. This type of character study could perhaps extend into other novels that interrogate the female condition during an equally gender troubled time. Whether or not the same signs for success or failure are still applicable in our modern day, there is value in understanding how women connect with the beauty they can find in the world that surrounds them.

Some women had to rely on their outer appearance to be successful in marriage during the early 1900s. Comparably, some modern women also use their beauty to achieve success. Dwight's comments on exchange and the social marketplace are applicable to more than Wharton's works:

The power of the marketplace, then, resides not in its presence, which is only marginal in *The House of Mirth*, but in its ability to reproduce itself, in its ability to assimilate everything else into its domain. As a controlling logic, a mode of human conduct and human association, the marketplace is everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous and invisible. Under its shadow even the most private affairs take on the essence of business transactions, for the realm of human relations is fully contained within an all-encompassing business ethic. (123-4)

The power dynamics that occur in the marriage market can be applied to any competitive market. It is interesting to use people's interactions with art as a way to determine their possible success or failures in the marketplace.

Marriage is still a pathway for understanding human relationships and psychology; however, it is not so strictly required for women as it was during Wharton's life. There are new routes—with the growth of social media and technology—that remove the concept of marriage as being necessary to a woman's prosperity, especially if she exists as a work of art. This change in social and cultural constructions over time is perhaps the main problem that would be encountered when trying to categorize women characters in contemporary texts as *art* or *artisan* archetypes. A woman's decision to remove herself from the marriage market in order to have freedom of self-expression is important to defining women as active or passive in regards to their life, actions, and their status at the conclusion of the text. If marriage were taken out of the equation, the ending for a Lily living in our modern time might be the same as a Gerty. The two types have become much more equal in power as women's rights, technology, entertainment, and education accessibility has exponentially increased.

For Wharton, her observations of these characters are closely linked to the presence of a marriage market because it is the lifestyle of which she was most knowledgeable. R. W. B. Lewis points out in his essay "A Writer of Short Stories," Wharton's uniqueness as a writer could be found in her being the first American novelist, even more than Henry James, to address the "marriage question." Wharton's interaction with the marriage market from a firsthand female point of view, gave her the ability to translate the deeply personal interactions between people whose lives are guided by the ideal of marriage. Lewis explains:



It was not only that her treatment of the question, in these multiple phases, displays so broad a range of tone and perspective, and so keen an eye for the dissolving and emergent structures of historical institutional and social life with which the question enmeshed. It is that the question, as Mrs. Wharton reflected on it, dragged with it all the questions about human nature and conduct to which her generous imagination was responsive. (12)

With the marriage question being so deeply ingrained in the decisions female characters make, it is impossible to predict Lily's success or failure without considering the effect of the marriage market. Her dependency on the market, and failure to realize that she could break from societal conventions, makes her lose the power to control her future.

In comparison, Undine fully manipulates social protocol to suit her own needs. Her ability to commodify herself keeps her progressing through various social circles. She understands the power art holds and how it factors into the marriage market. Like Undine, Mrs. Ansley in "Roman Fever," also breaks the conventions of what is socially acceptable for a young woman. She has the desire to be with Delphin and decides to not let any rule of propriety stop her. However, Mrs. Slade doesn't view the rules of society as breakable, and she passively follows them all the way up to attaining a proper marriage with Delphin, which is actually a win for Mrs. Slade in the power play between the two women. Both of the women get what they want, a marriage and a beautiful child, but their methods of entering the marriage market vary in how active or passive their decisions are—just as their methods of exchange during the conversation differ.

From early in her career, Wharton acknowledges the limited choices available to women and how harshly these limitations impact their lives, as is shown in Lily's downfall. In the middle of her writing career, Wharton starts to realize the cutthroat personality that it might take

to be dependent and successful within the marriage market. She writes Undine as an independent woman artisan, but the character has to also be stubborn and manipulative in order to get what she wants. Later in her career, Wharton sees the more minute differences between women that obey social constructions versus those who choose to detour from following them for a moment in order to indulge their own wants. Not all women are so strict in either deviating or accepting the rules of the marriage market, and the conclusion of some texts, as is demonstrated by Mrs. Slade and Ansley, are dependent on minor active or passive decisions. Although more singular in occurrence, even these decisions to occasionally break social rules can have an impact on their future happiness, even if they both eventually enter into the marriage market for the sake of survival.

Employing the terms *art* and *artisan* help to analyze and discuss the various female figures that Wharton so intricately details in her writing. The terms provide a guide for predicting the outcome of the texts, understanding the decisions female characters make, and explaining how art is important to the characterization of each woman. Wharton had a keen eye for art and its beauty. She understood the emotional link between the onlooker and the object and between the designer and the artwork. These terms reflect Wharton's love for art and connect that passion to the way she constructed her novels and the realism of life for women in her works. Wharton's eye for art reveals itself in her writing as a valuable tool for understanding the complicated female characters that she creates.

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