

The following essay examines Wharton's fiction within the context of a set of societal conventions in which her writing is framed and the ways in which these conventions work to frustrate the natural development of the individual life-narrative. The frustrations depicted in the following works here looked at result from the specific societal conditions in which her characters find themselves. The old New York aristocracy to which Wharton's parents belonged, with its conventional morality and inflexible standards of "scrupulous probity in business and private affairs",¹ is represented by Wharton as having a numbing effect on the moral and sexual development of her female protagonists. The foregoing will form the focus of my analysis in the sections dealing with frustrated moral integrity and frustrated femininity. Also to be found in this chapter is an examination of the specific manners on the basis of which this society operated, and the way in which these manners, as the physical manifestations of strict conventions, compound these individual frustrations.

The social elite of New York changed with the impact of a newly emerging industrial society in the 1880s. Wharton focuses on the transitional stage between the merging of these two societies and exposes the damaging consequences of the materialism that this new industrial society brought with it. She proposes that the most striking impact it had was to "debase people and ideas,"² and this will be looked at in the discussion of Lily Bart, as an ideal example of frustrated individuation.