FRUSTRATED SENSIBILITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CONVENTIONS OF THE NEW YORK ELITE OF WHARTON’S FICTION.

ZMAŘENÉ PROJEVY žENSKOSTI A OSOBNÍ INTEGRITY JAKO NÁSLEDEK SPOLEČENSKÝCH KONVENCÍ NEWYORKSKÉ ELITY V LITERÁRNÍM DÍLE EDITH WHARTON.

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů a literatury.

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INTRODUCTION

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.

² Ibid. 940.
Against the notions posited by French intellectuals such as Barthes and Foucault that it is solely people's appropriation or use of literature that should be the central concern of the theorist or critic, this essay will defend the biographical element, arguing that it is possible to trace certain lines of interconnection between the text and the author's life-narrative. While Derrida maintains that there are no texts, only readings, this essay will be arguing a contrary point of view that it is in fact possible to mediate textuality. Acknowledging the fact, taken from Nietzsche, that people judge works from their own particular perspectives so that it is possible that individuals can come up with their own readings, to say that this is where all meaning resides, is exaggerated. An author is born into historical circumstances which they could not choose, and neither are they free to completely transcend them; an author cannot be a blank medium writing from outside time and history. It follows that an author's work can be read as an indication of their historical circumstances.

Following on from this, the essay that follows will attempt to trace the connections between Edith Wharton's writings and the personal struggles she faced within the changing nature of American society at that time, and the way in which, as an intelligent and critical woman, her works give voice to a set of frustrations which, arguably, she sees as being incumbent on female society as a whole. My analysis will identify and examine these feminine frustrations represented in Wharton's writing within the context of

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3 This point was put forward in an essay by Barthes in 1977, “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost, a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” [Roland Barthes, Image, Music, Text (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 147.]
5 Perspectivism, as advanced by Nietzsche [Beyond Good and Evil (New York: Oxford University Press: 1998)] argues that a given methodology or theory is only a way of seeing, an optic or tool through which one can interpret, criticize, and deconstruct a given text or practice from a particular perspective.
how they relate to the transformation of urban society at that time, particularly, to Wharton’s perception of how the transition from an Old, mercantile society to the emerging society of the nouveaux riches accompanies a corresponding shift in women’s’ roles. In both instances, these roles, as this essay will show, are subjected upon women through the patriarchal order, which defines and demarcates women’s experience for its own purposes. It is from this perspective that my analysis of feminine frustration shall be viewed.

1. CONTEXTS

1.1. Critical Context

Blake Nevius in his critical study of Wharton’s fictions states that “her novels deal with the trapped sensibility”\(^6\). He further specifies that this topic is treated within two central themes in her fiction, that of “a large and generous nature [...] trapped into consanguinity with a meaner nature”, and a second one, resulting directly from the former, which he defines as Wharton trying to “determine what allowance of freedom or rebellion can be made for her trapped protagonists without at the same time threatening the structure of society.”\(^7\) There are numerous examples of ‘disastrous unions’ throughout Wharton’s work, such as those of the Bunner sisters, Ralph Marvell and Undine Spragg, and, most obviously tragic of all, that of Ethan and Zeena Frome. The second theme explores the key moral dilemmas her protagonists face when trying to consolidate their position in society. Carol Singley in her study *Matters of Mind and Spirit* focuses on this ‘spiritual’ aspect of Wharton’s work, and elevating Wharton above the simplified

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\(^7\) Ibid. 10.
classification of ‘novelist of manners’ she says that Wharton “persisted in raising difficult moral and spiritual questions in an upper-class society […] and she sought to affirm individual moral responsibility amid widespread complacency.”

The theme of entrapment is persistent in Wharton’s fiction: Anja Salmi calls her study Treatment of the Themes of Entrapment and Escape in Edith Wharton’s Novels, and in keeping with Nevius’s viewpoint she examines the cases of unsuccessful or unaccomplished male – female relationships. Susan Goodman in her Edith Wharton’s Women: Friends and Rivals explores how Wharton continues to explore societal restrictions on women.

With respect to the original definition by Blake Nevius quoted above, I will focus on the limitations of Wharton’s protagonists that are mainly those of society, along with the ways in which this society exerts its social power. These are still cases of “trapped sensibility”, but not necessarily limited to the confinement of a destructive relationship. The novels and stories under discussion will be those where the theme of conflicting claims of the individual and the society is strongly pronounced or is at the very center of interest. For my purpose the term ‘frustration’ is probably more appropriate than entrapment; Wharton’s heroines are rarely rebels – they don’t aspire to start a macrosocial revolution; rather, I see them as trying to find a microsocial alternative within the social structure to which they belong.

1.2. Biographical Context

Just like almost everything in her fiction, the theme under discussion - the theme of frustration - can be linked to Wharton’s

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own individual life experience. Born into one of the last remaining aristocratic families, she got married to a typical specimen of the high society gentleman who spent his time playing sports, hunting and enjoying the social life, but who had little intellectual needs or understanding of any forms of art. Teddy was a sadly inappropriate match for Wharton, who lived for mental and aesthetic stimuli. Their partnership also lacked any romantic fulfillment, and reflecting the dilemma of a heroine entrapped in a conventional marriage, Wharton, having rejected divorce on her own strict moral principles, finally resorted to it under the pressure of the physical impossibility of living with her husband, who gradually succumbed to an inherited mental disorder.

But Wharton had the misfortune of suffering from yet another oppressive force restraining her personality, that of her domineering, old fashioned mother. Lucretia Jones had no understanding or appreciation of her daughter’s intellectual needs, and, needless to say that she never encouraged this essential part of Edith’s nature. Furthermore, in perfect keeping with the upper class relaxed view of deeper religious and moral issues, she valued manners over morals, and her orders were often in conflict with Edith’s own deep moral sense. Edith had been interested in spiritual matters since childhood, and this interest took a Calvinist direction, quite out of place in her genteel environment, that rejected the idea of suffering. She developed her own strict moral code and recalls in *The Life And I* how she was “never free from the oppressive sense that I had two absolutely inscrutable beings to please – God & my mother – who, while ostensibly upholding the same principles of behavior, differed totally as to their application.”9 Elsewhere she says “My mother’s rule of behavior was that we should be ‘polite’”. As Singley sums up, “Lucretia judged on the basis of appearance only; she objected to breaches of

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form, not substance.”\textsuperscript{10} Wharton’s mother is seen as the embodiment of society, the hypocritical conventions that explicitly forbid telling the truth so as not to hurt other people’s feelings or offend someone’s taste. The authority of God can be seen as everything but society, the original and autonomous inclinations of Wharton’s spirit.

Apart from being torn apart by the opposing forces of ‘God and mother’ in her childhood, Wharton’s artistic accomplishments were never recognized by anyone of her milieu and family background. As she mentions in her autobiography \textit{A Backward Glance}, “None of my relations ever spoke to me about my books, either to praise or to blame – they simply ignored them [...] the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of family disgrace, which might be condoned but never forgotten.”\textsuperscript{11}

This glimpse of Wharton’s life story serves as a kind of outline and foregrounding for the issues about to be discussed. Wharton emerges as having at once suffered from all the restrictions and resulting frustrations that she makes the variety of her heroines face separately. Wharton was an exceptionally intelligent, imaginative and spiritually oriented being, all of which was essentially at odds with the environment into which she was born. The women on whom this essay will focus all posses at least one of these ‘flaws’ and struggle more or less unsuccessfully to harmonize it in some way with the antagonistic forces of the ‘other God’, the powerful social structures working in the national cultural society of the United States.

\textsuperscript{10} Singley 101.
\textsuperscript{11} Wharton, Novellas and Other Writings 891.
1.3. New York sociality

This section defines the thematic limitations of the writings selected. While the above-mentioned ‘main theme’ as defined by Blake Nevius pervades the whole of Wharton’s corpus of texts, which include the New England tales of Ethan Frome and Summer, industrial novels such as The Gods Arrive, and most of her short stories of varied settings and time periods, I shall concentrate on its treatment only in the ‘society novels’ and stories; those geographically situated in New York City and chronologically in the period between the 1860s and 1900s.

In her society novels, Wharton focuses exclusively on the upper class of New York City. Sometimes called ‘the New York aristocracy’, it is the environment she knew most intimately. The term ‘aristocracy’ literally applied only to a few families, direct descendants of Dutch and English governors. The remaining body of this class was aristocratic in that they lived on the inherited wealth accumulated centuries before by their prosperous forefathers, mostly merchants and landowners. This small group of people had for generations cultivated a life of leisure, and had developed mechanisms to preserve their small world and lifestyle.

“In the well-regulated, well-fed Summers world the unusual was regarded as either immoral or ill-bred, and people with emotions were not visited.”

Most of Wharton’s society novels contrast an older regime with the next one. In her life Wharton witnessed two such transformations. The Age of Innocence is generally valued as a unique literary representation of the vanished old New York society, but it also captures the beginnings of the invasion of the nouveaux riches of industrial wealth. Around the 1880s this new society started

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assuming control over New York City, still valuing the manners of the older class and trying to imitate them. Thus Simon Rosedale in *The House of Mirth* wants to buy himself a wife from society to secure his position. But this regard for the old ways disappears completely with the following generations of irresponsible spenders of the early twentieth century, when any remnants of the 'genteel tradition' have given way to sheer radical materialism, well captured in *The Twilight Sleep*. Wharton criticized the destructive effects of this at last purely materialistic society on her more highly evolved female protagonists. This essay will concentrate on the two societies – Wharton’s own, and the one that replaced it.

2. **Old New York**

2.1. Thwarted moral integrity

While Wharton’s fiction is often characterized as a witty satire of indolent New York high society, the prevailing tone of her fiction is more tragic than humorous. There is manifest a deep interest in issues of individual moral consciousness in her texts, which goes beyond social parody. "No novel worth anything can be anything but a novel ‘with a purpose’ & if anyone who cared for the moral issues did not see in my work that I care for it, I should have no one to blame but myself [...]"¹³ Wharton wrote in one of her letters, and many of her short stories and novellas focus exclusively on the individual’s inner struggle concerning the issue of personal ethics.

The character Kate Orme in the longer story *The Sanctuary* shows an almost extravagant sensitivity to moral subtleties; appalled by

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¹³ Singley 6.
the moral flaws of her fiancée, she debates whether to abandon him, but then, transforming her former love for him into “a passion of charity for his race”\(^\text{14}\) marries him *solely* to prevent his future offspring from succumbing to the “vice of the moral fiber”\(^\text{15}\), which they will presumably inherit from their father. The text never fully manages to shake off the reader’s disbelief at such a bizarre foundation for an extreme personal sacrifice. But the very absurdity of the argument conveys Wharton’s fascination with the question of ethics.

In her more extensive works, the moral dilemmas are not limited to the private choices of the heroine, but are contextualized in the larger conflict of the heroine and her social environment. The following section looks at instances where the strict moral standards of the individual compete with a shallow society’s social and ideologically inflected judgment.

### 2.1.1. Lizzie Hazeldene in *New Year’s Day*

In the story *New Year’s Day* from the collection of novellas *Old New York*, Lizzie Hazeldene takes money from a lover to help out her dying husband. Her affair is discovered or rather inferred by the very nucleus of the society, as she is seen leaving The Fifth Avenue Hotel with the lover Henry Prest. When her husband dies soon afterwards Lizzie spends half a year in a deep depression, which is considered by everybody to be ‘very proper’. After a decent interval has lapsed she is given a chance to win back the acceptance of the society through marrying her former lover. She refuses his offer, however, and chooses to spend her life in isolation from society.


\(^{15}\) Ibid. 347.
The scene when Henry Prest offers marriage to Lizzie reveals to the reader as well as to Henry, who had until no idea of her real motivation, the depths of her loyalty for her husband: “I’d do it all again tomorrow – for the same object! I got what I wanted – I gave him one last year, that last good year. It was a relief from anxiety that kept him alive, that kept him happy.” Henry threatens her with society’s disfavor if she doesn’t save her reputation by marryng him, but Lizzie is resolved to face the ostracism. At that moment she does not realize though what such life will be for her; she has the disadvantage of being inconsolably sociable. She creates her own small circle, mostly men, who attend her suppers, but her relations with them are strictly innocent. Nevertheless, these contacts only strengthen the view the ladies of society hold of her, and as the narrator of the story reflects: “[...] at the moment she ceased to deserve the blame of the society, she found herself cut off from it, and reduced to the status of the “fast” widow noted for her jolly suppers.” She is never allowed to escape the sense of exile. Considering that the best New York society was really just the few privileged families, and there was no adequate substitute for it, being expelled from it could only mean descent, and greater loneliness than if one had never been a part of it.

The narrator is the only person to whom Lizzie, towards the end of her life, decides to tell her story. He is a young man at the time and is shocked to find out the truth about this woman at whose mention his mother had said: “She was bad...always. [...] They used to meet at the Fifth Avenue Hotel.” These two lines resound throughout the story and embody the paradox of Lizzie’s position. An individual with a strong moral integrity is denounced by society on account of her alleged moral corruption. Saving her honor through marrying Henry Prest would for her mean morally

16 Wharton, Novellas and Other Writings 536.
17 Ibid. 547.
18 Ibid. 491.
prostituting herself. Susan Goodman in her study *Edith Wharton’s Women* comments that for Lizzie “a prostitute sells her time, not her soul”¹⁹ and she links this reasoning to Lily Bart’s dilemma in *The House of Mirth*, where Lily suspects that “not much separates the business of marriage from the business of prostitution”²⁰ Society that values manners over morals sees in Lizzie’s affair an offence to taste, and it blames Lizzie for not covering its distastefulness by the coat of respectability. But Lizzie, who painfully realizes the moral offence that she’d committed, chooses to expiate for her betrayal by enduring seclusion, which is a much more severe punishment than what the society blames her for not having done.

2.1.2. Ellen in *The Age of Innocence*

The discrepancy between society’s professed and highly ideologized morality and the individual application of it is also pointed out in the novelistic text, *The Age Of Innocence*. Ellen Olenska is more truly moral than the ostensibly blameless society to which she perforce belongs. Due to her breaches of form on numerous occasions, she is being attentively watched throughout the novel; but it is the general assumption that she and Newland Archer are lovers that finally condemns her to a forced exile. In fact it is she who persistently refuses to carry out the affair. Her moral earnestness contrasts with the superficial ethics of May Welland, Archer’s fiancée; on the basis of her theoretical knowledge of honorable action, May claims to be able to give Archer up if there is someone else he cares for because, she says, “I couldn’t have my happiness made out of a wrong – an unfairness – to somebody else. What sort of a life could we build on such

²⁰ Ibid. 41.
foundations? In reality she disregards this noble impulse, and when her relationship with Archer is threatened she lies to Ellen about her pregnancy. But even before hearing that, Ellen had decided to sacrifice her love for Archer, on the same principle voiced by May. It is an irony for Archer, who had unwittingly brought her around to this way of looking at things; in order to prevent scandal for the family, he is asked to dissuade Ellen from her divorce proceedings, and to advise her on the customs of the society. Accordingly, he wakes Ellen to the sense of responsibility for the effect of her actions on those around her, a view that she will firmly hold on to even against him. Ellen rises above conventional morality as well in basic human kindness; when the banker Julius Beaufort goes bankrupt, and is unanimously discarded by society on account of his shady financial deals, Ellen is the only person who dares to visit his wife, out of compassion.

2.2. Short-Circuited femininities and the positive – negative woman

Lizzie’s case resounds with one of the crucial principles of society’s social and ideological structure: the double standard for men and women regarding their sexuality, ever-present throughout Wharton’s fiction. It is the insistence in dividing women into ‘good’ and ‘bad’, based on the longstanding Christian models of Mary and Eve, that Wharton was deeply dissatisfied with. Paradoxically maintained by the women of society, this overly fast distinction forbids any kind of ‘legal’ emotional and sexual growth for women. Young girls are kept in a vacuum of ignorance till their wedding day, after which they are expected to seek fulfillment in the prosaic career of a society hostess. Men on the other hand are allowed a certain amount of sexual freedom, and a degree of irresponsibility before marriage is even in a way expected of a

young man. As the fictional character Newland Archer is aware in *The Age Of Innocence*:

[…] when such things happened’ it was undoubtedly foolish of the man, but somehow always criminal of the woman. All the elderly ladies whom Archer knew regarded any woman who loved imprudently as necessarily unscrupulous and designing, and mere simple-minded man as powerless in her clutches.22

The division of women into a Victorian-like morality of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ is so fundamental that it pertains to all spheres of a woman’s life, and it lies beneath all the discriminations that trouble the variety of Wharton’s heroines. Whether a woman is more inspired, courageous, emotional or morally honest than average, she’ll be considered ‘bad’. Wharton examines the individual and social, the personal and public conditions and possibilities of these women who had been subject to “the deadening process of forming ‘a lady’”23

2.2.1. The perpetuation of the classically innocent maiden

May Welland in *The Age of Innocence* is, as Newland Archer observes, “That terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything”24 But May is quite happily such a social product; her emotional and imaginative needs are no greater than the limited scale assigned to her by rules of propriety. Delia and Charlotte in the story *The Old Maid*, from the collection *Old New York*, represent ‘unhappy products’ of the same social and cultural system. The dictates of moral conventionality having suppressed their emotional impulses, Charlotte and Delia will be examined as cases of frustrated or short-circuited femininity.

22 Wharton, The Age of Innocence 96.
24 Wharton, The Age of Innocence 53.
The narrative of *The Old Maid* depicts a sublime drama of two women competing over a child. Delia is a young matron, married into a prominent Ralston family, and her cousin Charlotte, who is already on the brink of spinsterhood, is just about to marry another Ralston, Joe. But an unexpected obstacle turns up. Charlotte confesses to Delia an illegitimate child, which she’s secretly supporting in an orphanage. Because her future husband insists that Charlotte stops visiting the orphanage for fear of bringing disease to the house, she has to decide whether to either sacrifice seeing her baby daughter, or give up the prospect of marriage. Charlotte admits to Delia that the father of the child is the artist Clem Spender whom Delia had loved but couldn’t marry on account of his poverty. This information crucially affects Delia’s consideration of Charlotte’s misfortune; the fact that Clem Spender had apparently never been in love with Charlotte doesn’t alleviate Delia’s sense of unfairness, envy and gradually a hatred of her cousin. Although Delia could very easily persuade Joe Ralston to let Charlotte continue visiting the orphanage after their marriage, she decides instead to destroy her cousin’s chance of happiness by telling Joe that Charlotte had “coughed blood” and that he must not marry her. The following traces Delia’s reasoning behind her decision:

How easy it was – and yet it must not be! Whatever happened, she could not let Charlotte Lowell marry Joe Ralston. All the traditions of honor and probity in which she had been brought up forbade her to connive at such a plan. [...] The idea of Charlotte’s marrying Joe Ralston – her own Jim’s cousin – without revealing her past to him, seemed to Delia as dishonorable as it would have seemed to any Ralston. And to tell him the truth would at once put an end to the marriage; of that even Chatty was aware. Social tolerance was not dealt in the same measure to men and to women [...] As clearly as it was Delia’s duty to
save Clem Spender’s child, so clearly, also, she seemed destined to sacrifice her mistress.\textsuperscript{25}

The passage illustrates Delia’s dependence on the traditionalist morality of the Ralston family, and the degree to which she has adopted it. She is trying to persuade herself that it is for the sake of “honor and probity” that she must sacrifice her cousin. She is well aware what kind of future she is inflicting on Charlotte. Taking all the massive power of traditions and social structures into consideration, it doesn’t seem believable that these alone could stand behind such egregious cruelty. The real reason behind Delia’s decision is her need to possess the child of her former lover. Faced with the emptiness of her conventional marriage, she wants to compensate for her unfulfilled passion. The way she chooses to save the child from the desolate life in orphanage is through adopting it.

Charlotte is thus left to become an old maid, although she’s living in the same house with her daughter; she never acknowledges her motherhood to the girl Tina, for the sake of her innocence. While seeing her daughter financially secured, she is also forced to witness Tina’s gradual attachment to Delia, whom she calls ‘mother’. The tragedy of Charlotte is that she is not allowed to fully realize herself neither as a wife nor as a mother. Her suffering is completely unnecessary; it only serves to preserve the social order.

Delia represents the two-faced nature of society, a society that chooses not to hear or see the unpleasant, for she never fully admits her real motives. The closest she comes to acknowledging them comes toward the end of the story, when Charlotte confronts Delia with all that she had been holding against her: “With all your forbearances and your generosities you’ve ended up by robbing me

\textsuperscript{25} Wharton, Novellas and Other Writings 397.
of my child. And I’ve put up with it all for her sake – because I knew I had to.”26 Afterwards Delia admits to herself that: “There was a strange element of truth in some of the things that Charlotte had said. With what divination her maternal passion had endowed her! Her jealousy seemed to have a million feelers.”27

At first glance, the old maid of the story is Charlotte, a sad victim of society’s dangerously narrow-minded conventions. But the narrative technique of the story suggests an ambiguity as to which of the two characters is central. It is a third person narrative, from the perspective of Delia, whose inner monologue the reader follows. Charlotte’s thoughts are never revealed, and her figure is shown only as reflected by Delia. The narrative device of a reflector is not unusual with Wharton; in The Age of Innocence, Wharton directs the reader’s attention to Ellen Olenska, who is seen and judged by Newland Archer. Delia, though not appearing so at first sight, has the characteristics of an old maid in having never experienced a real passion or suffering.

Literally, neither Delia nor Charlotte is an old maid. Just as, from the point of view of their emotional starvation, inflicted on them by the prudish standards of society, they both qualify to be one. The figure of the old maid, with the implications of sacrifice, waste, and outrageous offence to life’s intent, emerges as a scary representative of the extremely unnatural standards advocated by society.

2.2.2. Maiden becomes a matriarch

The story The Old Maid also illuminates the underlying causes of female discrimination against each other. Delia could be viewed as Wharton’s case study of the birth of a matriarch, a society matron

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26 Wharton, Novellas and Other Writings 440.
27 Ibid 441.
who assists the continuation of the cruel and intolerant social order towards women. Penelope Lively in her introduction to *The Age of Innocence* points out when discussing the fate of Ellen Olenska in that novel, that “it is the matriarchs who sniff her out – the custodians of tradition, of family integrity and of sexual regularity.”

Susan Goodman in her Edith Wharton’s *Women* presents Janet Malcolm’s view that goes even further:

[the] Symbolic world of Edith Wharton’s fiction is a world where ‘strange experiments’ (that is deviations from the social norm) inexorably lead to tragedy, and where the callousness and heartlessness by which this universe is ruled is the callousness and heartlessness of women.

Goodman herself doesn’t endorse this view and goes on to explore cases of accomplished or attempted female bonding instead; but the case of Delia seems in part to support the theory as well as possibly explain its origin. For women such as Delia, ‘heartlessness’ is not an inborn characteristic, but rather a twisted state of being, resulting from the pressures of social mores. The following will show that they are victims of the social structure just as much as they make the others suffer.

The puritan code of innocence for young girls works to suppress all their natural impulses for life, but it can’t erase them entirely. Delia, a classic product of the conventional upbringing, sees her bedroom like a “tomb” where lay buried her dreams of love and of true life. Materially secured by the right choice of husband, the children are supposed to be the one emotional fulfillment for her: “[...] the babies who were supposed to “make up for everything,” and didn’t – though they were such darlings, and one had no definite notion as to what it was that one had missed, and that they were to make up for.” Delia gains the notion of what she had

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28 Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* X.
29 Goodman 48.
30 Wharton, *Novellas and Other Writings* 377.
missed through Charlotte’s eyes, where she sees a touch of real life: “[...] Charlotte’s eyes – so much the more expressive for what they had looked upon. A secret envy stabbed the wife who had lacked this last enlightenment.” 31 Having been cautiously shielded from life since childhood, Delia sighs to herself towards the end of the story, “Life had passed her by, and left her with the Ralstons.” 32

As has been said, Delia chooses to compensate for her starved passion by the hideous act of stealing the affection of her cousin’s child. Nevertheless she avoids fully grasping the real impetus of her actions; in her inner monologue she clings to the illusion that she’s acting on the authority of the deity of decency, against which Charlotte had sinned – in having loved unwisely. Delia makes sure to bring up the girl Tina to be as innocent and ignorant of life as she had been, protecting her from any harmful knowledge (for instance the truth about her origin), and thus unwittingly perpetuates the order that had made herself suffer.

Going back to the above-mentioned ‘callousness’ of society matriarchs who enforce the antagonism of either ‘pure’ or ‘sinful’, it is now evident that their intolerance is motivated by their jealousy for life experience or sexual and emotional fulfillment, stemming from the very bareness of their own lives. Furthermore, in the face of their impoverished personalities, their posited purity and uprightness alone preserves in them the sense of self-worth. As they build the structure of their lives upon respectability, they need to make sure that other, disreputable, culpable women exist. Judith Fryer points out that women create the norms of “strict dress and demeanor, modesty, cleanliness, and prudishness” 33 to separate their social world from that of men to “gain power and a sense of

31 Wharton, Novellas and Other Writings 397.
32 Ibid. 420.
value”34 in an otherwise male-dominated social environment. So the above discussed restraining influence of the matriarchal system must be viewed in the context of a larger patriarchal structure, which preconditions its existence and its power over the women population.

This creates links to society, which can be seen as a tribe or a clan, where the social rituals serve to protect the well-nigh authoritarian and dictatorial community. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

2.3. Social Manners

Blake Nevius, referring to Lionel Trilling, classifies manners as “customs and polite usages, surely – but also language, names, dress, cuisine, the various expressions of religious, moral, political aesthetic values – all the signs, tangible and vague, by which a group either comprising or functioning within a culture emphasizes its separateness”35 As a set of rules of social behavior and forms covering every aspect of an individual’s public life, Trilling’s code clearly demarcates the borders of acceptable expression for women. As has been illustrated earlier, the matriarchal structure of the old New York elite holds the society together by maintaining the appearance of purity and morality. Thus Ellen Olenska immediately falls under suspicion due to her unconventional choice of a house in a strange part of town, just as her overly plain dress, which exposes her bare shoulders at the Opera is an “offence”, deemed dangerous even by Newland Archer, who “hated to think of May Welland being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless to the dictates of Taste.”36

34 Fryer 130.
35 Nevius 64.
36 Wharton, The Age of Innocence 32.
Wharton greatly exploits the communication code of old New York society. She is typically classified as a novelist of manners, a view shared by Blake Nevius, who points out “the importance of manners in conditioning the view of reality we get through her novels.”37 But as Carol Singley maintains, such a view of Wharton is incomplete: “However useful the label ‘novelist of manners’ may be, it exerts a subtle bias, allowing critics to focus on the social features of a writer’s portrayals at the expense of her deeper levels of insight into human nature.”38 The following section will demonstrate Wharton’s use of ‘manners’ as both to capture the material specifications of the given society, and to point out the impact of manners, as a physical extension of morals and conventions, on the individual’s (woman’s) life narrative.

2.3.1. Imperative of concealment and indiscernibility

In *The Backward Glance*, Wharton recalls showing an early attempt at a novel to her mother. The opening lines present a lady of society apologizing to her visitor that she hasn’t had time to tidy up the drawing room. Lucretia Jones immediately saw the absurdity of this imaginary situation and offered her daughter the terse comment: “Drawing-rooms are always tidy.”39 Apart from its being a clear statement on manners, these authentic words succinctly embody the area of interest for this chapter; the spatial delineation of a ‘drawing-room’ as a place where the private meets public points to the very stuff of social life, ‘always’ symbolizing the dogmatism and fixity characteristic of that society. The status of the word ‘tidy’, with its connotations such as ‘orderly’, ‘organized’, or ‘immaculate’, had been, among the members of old New York society, elevated to a supreme and universal marker of quality.

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37 Nevius 62.
38 Singley 2.
39 Wharton, Novellas and Other Writings 839.
The closed old New York society “where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs” employed, and required, a fine sensitivity to the various implications of conduct, and highly developed observational skills. This is reflected for example in the sureness with which the women of the family divine the love affair between Archer and Ellen, when neither of the pair suspects anything. The individual members of the group are governed by the principle of watchfulness of others, and the imperative of concealment on their own part. This attitude towards communal life finds its epitome in the description of Mrs. Peniston, the archetypal member of the ‘old stock’ in *The House of Mirth*:

She had always been a looker-on at life, and her mind resembled one of those little mirrors which her Dutch ancestors were accustomed to affix to their upper windows so that from the depths of an impenetrable domesticity they might see what was happening on the street.  

The general atmosphere of attention adds a perilous quality to social existence. The scene about to be discussed, from *The New Year’s Day*, shows the character Lizzie Hazeldean in the exemplary situation of a dinner party, where she needs to employ all her abilities to read and operate the sets of conventional social codes.

Lizzie, who a few hours earlier had been seen leaving a hotel with Henry Prest, walks into Mrs. Struthers’ drawing room, where most of the guests assembled have already privately passed their judgment on her. She is not sure just how much they know, and her task is to find out, and prevent any further suspicion. At first she catches a glimpse of Sillerton Jackson: “she fancied that a dry

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40 Wharton, The Age of Innocence 55.
smile lifted his moustache. ‘He doesn’t usually bow to me as low as that,’ she thought apprehensively.”42 The author had introduced the character of Sillerton Jackson in *The Age of Innocence* where he is the greatest authority on ‘family’ and on ‘most of the scandals and mysteries that had smoldered under the unruffled surface of New York society.’43 In Mrs. Struthers’s drawing room Lizzie, already on the alert due to a “too-low bow” that she received from him, is conscious of his scrutinizing gaze:

He suggested, behind that assumed carelessness of pose, the patient fixity of a naturalist holding his breath near the crack from which some tiny animal might suddenly issue — if one watched long enough, or gave it, completely enough, the impression of not looking at it [...]44

The passage suggests the warlike nature of the very act and process of socializing, and the tension and sense of fear accompanying such social gatherings. Unable to make out whether Sillerton had seen her leaving the hotel or not, Lizzie almost welcomes coming face to face with Sabina Wesson as this lady crosses the room. Mrs. Wesson, a respected matron, would have definitely been of the party watching from the window and Lizzie knows that “it all depended on how much Mrs. Wesson had seen, supposing she *had* seen anything.”45 She doesn’t have to wait long for her dilemma to resolve itself:

Mrs. Wesson, who, two seconds earlier, appeared in all her hard handsomeness to be bearing straight down on Mrs. Hazeldean, with a scant yard of clear *parquet* between them — Mrs. Wesson, as her animated back and her active red fan now called on all the company to notice, had never been there at all, had never seen Mrs. Hazeldean46

42 Wharton, Novellas and Other Writings 509.
44 Wharton, Novellas and Other Writings 513.
45 Ibid. 515.
46 Ibid. 515.
Mrs. Wesson leaves no doubt in Lizzie’s mind as to her opinion of her, but more importantly, she passes her judgment publicly - to draw everybody’s attention to Lizzie, she ignores her. In the system ruled above all by appearance, there seems to be a law that for something to be considered nonexistent, it needs to be shown as such – that is not for it to be such. And vice versa, to ignore something, or behave as if it didn’t exist, means to proclaim its existence. Mrs. Wesson is showing to everybody that she hadn’t seen Lizzie; she is literally proclaiming Lizzie to be one of the unpleasant facts of life that have to be ignored.

2.3.2. Social Manners as a strategy for preserving community

The tribal character of the community, where manners function to mark out the limits of a group and to preserve it, is well portrayed in The Age of Innocence. The pure May Welland represents the society matriarch and the sinful Ellen Olenska is the disruptive intruder who needs to be banished from the community. This is done very tastefully, by giving her a leaving party, in May and Archer’s house. The mechanisms of this ritual are communicated through Newland Archer’s reflections, who suddenly realizes the huge power of the social structure that he belongs to, and his own subjection to it:

And then it came over him [...] that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers [...] he understood that, by means yet unknown to him, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved, and that now the whole tribe rallied about his wife on the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything.⁴⁷

The tribalism of this scene is not explicit, but it is understood. Even though the whole purpose of the dinner party is to make it clear to Ellen that she is not wanted, the façade of friendliness has to be

⁴⁷ Wharton, The Age of Innocence 282.
maintained. With an obstinate insistence on decorum, Ellen as the
guest of honor is given a seat next to Archer. When her other
neighbor starts talking to someone else, Archer notices how “May,
serenely enthroned between Mr. van der Luyden and Mr. Selfridge
Merry, had cast a quick glance down the table. It was evident that
the host and the lady on his right could not sit through the whole
meal in silence.” Archer complies and forces himself into a trivial
exchange with Ellen, the last conversation he was ever to share
with her. Another of his observations characterizes not only the
immediate occasion but the general nature of the old traditionalists:

It was the old New York way of taking life “without
effusion of blood;” the way of people who dreaded
scandal more than disease, and who considered that
nothing was more ill-bred then “scenes,” except the
behavior of those who gave rise to them. 49

While it is natural for any closed elite to be watchful of its outer
limits, the animosity of the New York society towards Ellen
Olenska suggests a desperation of a kind, the way the elite clings to
its old world is a sign of its social consciousness of looming defeat
and extinction. It is possible that this small society was beginning
to feel threatened, by the as yet insignificant but already present
manifestations of the emerging nouveaux riches.

48 Wharton, The Age of Innocence 283.
49 Ibid. 282.
3. NOVEL NEW YORK

3.1. City-cultural society

The works discussed above were dealing with the old New York of the generation of Wharton’s parents. But in Wharton’s own times, in the 1880’s and 1890’s new millionaires from the west had begun to permeate the old social elite, to the extent of overwhelming it completely; “The Van Renselaers and Rhinelanders might purse their lips at the ostentation of the Vanderbilts, but in the dollar world the biggest bank balance was bound to win out.”50 These “invaders”, as Wharton called them, turned the quiet brownstone Fifth Avenue into a “dizzy parade of derivative facades”51 and introduced divorce as a fashionable asset. The society that emerged was more vulgar, openly controlled by money, with not even the slightest pretence of moral values.

Wharton chose this transitional stage as the setting for her two novels, The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country. Both these novels are generally noted for their harsh critique of the new society’s crude capitalist materialism, and also for Wharton’s application of social determinism; both the characters of Lily Bart and Undine Spragg are presented as ‘products’ of the social system, and it is the force of the social machine that crushes and elevates them, respectively.

3.2. Lily Bart and blocked individuality

When looking for a sufficiently profound theme for a novel in the context of the “society of irresponsible pleasure seekers”, Wharton came to the conclusion that, in her own words, “a frivolous society

50 Louis Auchincloss, Edith Wharton (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 11.
51 Ibid. 11.
can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart."52

Lily Bart, the tragic heroine of *The House of Mirth* is characterized by two tendencies – a love and taste for luxury and a strong desire for her own free expression. These two needs prove fatally incompatible in the bounds of that “frivolous society” and Lily, after a long struggle to maintain both her material and social position and her integrity, is destroyed. Lily’s death articulates Wharton’s verdict of society as operating against the individual’s self-development.

Lily is beautiful, from a traditional but impoverished family, relying on her old-fashioned aunt, who gives her money enough for new dresses but who doesn’t tolerate gambling or smoking, which have become the fashion. Due to her insufficient means, Lily’s existence in fashionable society is absolutely dependent on the goodwill of the rich hostesses. While the women are ready to help Lily out as long as she’s trying to do the sensible thing, i.e. find a rich husband, they become suspicious and watchful when she starts losing her direction. As an unmarried girl she is under closer scrutiny than the married women. Although her social skills are perfect - as Judith Fryer notes she knows how to “look and to be so exactly what the occasion required”53 - she gets nevertheless tired of the constant “servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality”54, and occasionally breaks the rules of propriety. On one such occasion she visits the bachelor flat of Lawrence Selden for a cup of tea. She doesn’t manage to leave the building unnoticed, and the first of many rumors quickly spread around. With an air of premonition

52 Wharton, Novellas and Other Writings 940.
53 Fryer 89.
54 Wharton, The House of Mirth 100.
she thinks to herself: “Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine? Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?” She will have to pay the final price for the many similar innocent ‘escapes’. Her aunt disinherits her and her rich friends gradually abandon her.

Having lost the protection of other women, Lily is left prey to a male and money-dominated social world. Torn between the claims of her autonomous identity on one hand, and her need of material luxury on the other, she stubbornly refuses to make the final compromise; selling herself to a rich man as a wife, which would reduce her to a piece of merchandise. Her subsequent descent from the elite is marked by increasing ‘dinginess’ and vulgarity, through an unsuccessful attempt to make a living at the milliner’s to a boarding house and an accidental overdose of sleeping pills.

After resisting the temptation of a rich husband, Lily is faced with yet another test of her integrity; accidentally in possession of intimate love letters belonging to one of the fashionable ladies, Lily could easily threaten her with exposure - this lady would give her protection and help establish her position among the elite once again. This is all the more alluring as Lily at this point faces utter poverty. But her moral scrupulousness and old-fashioned sense of honor stops Lily from taking this course. In the context of this ruthless society, Nevius comments, “Mrs. Wharton seems to imply [...] that in the struggle for survival the morally scrupulous individual has in effect disarmed himself.” Looking back to Ellen Olenska and Lizzie Hazeldean, Lily also qualifies as being voluntarily victimized by her own morally superior individuated standards.

56 Nevius 58.
Lily’s interest for the purposes of this thesis is in her frustrated freedom, the self and expression, all of which could be called aspects of individuation. Linking this theme with Wharton’s own life, the thwarted expression might reflect her own fear of not being allowed to realize her artistic potential as a writer. She makes a point in her autobiography of how her early literary achievements “were felt only as a drawback and an embarrassment” in her native New York. On a symbolic level, Lily’s urge for individuation is represented by her constant desire for her own space, articulated for instance in her exclamation to Selden in his flat: “How delicious to have a place like this all to one’s self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman!” She contrasts Selden’s – man’s freedom to her own impossibility of it; as a marriageable girl she has to behave within narrow bounds assigned by propriety, only to exchange them for the hardly liberating dependence on a rich husband. Elsewhere she complains of “physical ugliness of the offending furniture” in her aunt’s house, where she dreads being “buried alive”. She is constantly aware of the visual qualities of her surroundings, and the lack of beauty has a destructive effect of her spirit. She wishes for her own apartment, which she’d design so that “every tint and line should combine to enhance her beauty and give distinction to her leisure!” The room of one’s own is also a classic image of self-integrity, a moral and spiritual center of one’s being; this Lily lacks completely in her fragmented existence based on compromises. Lily’s need for decorating the room according to her personality reverberates with a creative faculty, an artistic potential, which she is not allowed to express. The following extract specifies that this gift of hers, is to embody grace:

Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product that she was: an

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57 Wharton, Novellas and Other Writings 892.
59 Ibid. 98.
60 Ibid. 108.
organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight [...] and was it her fault that a purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? 61

The "narrow range" in which Lily can only survive is luxury. Clearly, the potential to live as a decoration could be viewed as a useless one; a contemporary reviewer found Lily’s condition "absolutely devoid of appeal to the sympathies of normally constituted intelligence"62. But it is not Lily’s fault that such a seemingly trivial predicament should form an intrinsic part of her personality; the fact that it proves fatal, together with its very triviality points the finger of blame at fashionable society for having produced an individual so dependent on it that she is doomed to perish outside it.

3.3. Lily, Undine and Social manners

Several years after the publication of The House of Mirth, Wharton, even more deeply offended by the vulgar course of New York establishment society, presented a bitter satire in the novel The Custom of the Country. A monstrous caricature of the ‘new woman’, Undine Spragg is the ultimate representative of the “Invaders” and determinedly conquers the very stronghold of New York aristocracy. While also staged as a product, she is a direct counterpart to Lily Bart. She has no self, morality, feeling, or taste, only a heartless materialistic ambition, which ensures her success where Lily had lost.

Concentrating on the movement of the central characters on the social ladder, The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country afford many parallels; Lily Bart’s gradual descent from the elite to

61 Wharton, The House of Mirth 269.
62 Ibid. xxxix.
the very bottom mirrors Undine’s ascent, as both these transitions follow the same route, only in opposing directions. Both books are rich in the many manifestations of status, descriptions of interior, dress, demeanor and language; the lower strata of society are measured by degrees of “shabbiness” and disorder, while the elite’s lifestyle is marked by detailed organization and refinement. Lily is conscious of her fall when contemplating the “Gormer milieu” in which she has found herself. The Gormers have successfully gone up one level from ‘the hotel’, which is the first station of the new rich, but haven’t yet managed to infiltrate into the top society. This social periphery strikes Lily as

[...] only a flamboyant copy of her own world, a caricature approximating the real thing as the ‘society play’ approaches the manners of the drawing room [...] the difference lay in a hundred shades of aspect and manner, from the pattern of the man’s waistcoats to the inflection of the women’s voices.63

Undine Spragg, initially “stranded in lonely splendor in a sumptuous West Side hotel”64, embodies such a ‘flamboyant copy’. Her main concern is to get to the “right set”, by modeling herself perfectly on Lily’s world. The following extracts will show the open sarcasm and mockery in Wharton’s portrayal of Undine. By contrasting Undine’s crude manners to those of the aristocracy Wharton draws attention to the radical change in values that was taking place. Undine’s exaggerated tastelessness also makes of her a caricature, a model of the ‘new female’ as a necessary outcome, as Wharton saw it, of the materialistic direction that the new society was taking. The depths of Undine’s unawareness of the finer shades of elegance that distinguish the real elite from the rest of the moneyed crowd are revealed on several occasions. The first comes when she is contemplating a choice of notepaper to answer

63 Wharton, The House of Mirth 229.
a dinner invitation from Mrs. Fairford of a prominent aristocratic family; having read in the "Boudoir Chat" that "the smartest women were using the new pigeon-blood notepaper with white ink," Undine is perplexed at the choice of a plain white sheet of the lady's invitation. "What if white paper were really newer than pigeon-blood?" Her first impulse is to use the red paper herself, as she prefers it and besides "she wasn't going to truckle to any woman who lived in a small house down beyond Park Avenue." Her caution in the end rightly instructs her against it. As to Mrs. Fairford's residence, Undine's disregard stems from the same kind of ignorance; Washington Square, which is where the said lady lived, was at the time still the home of the last remaining families of the old aristocracy. At the dinner, Undine is further disappointed: "[...] she had expected to view the company through a bower of orchids and eat pretty-colored entrées in ruffled papers. Instead, there was only a low center-dish of ferns, and plain roasted and broiled meat [...] she thought it dull of Mrs. Fairford not to have picked up something newer." Similarly, the conversation, conducted by Mrs. Fairford on cultural subjects, is not a success: "Undine did not even know that there were any pictures to be seen, much less that 'people' went to see them; and she had read no new book but When the Kissing Had to Stop, of which Mrs. Fairford seemed not to have heard."

Having learned her lesson, Undine sets out the very next day to the art gallery that Mrs. Fairford had mentioned. Once there she "flung herself into rapt attitudes before the canvases, scribbling notes in the catalogue" hoping to be noticed there by the right people. Her non-existent personality is an advantage in a world ruled by appearance; she doesn't know the meaning of taste nor elegance,

66 Ibid. 13.
67 Ibid. 21.
68 Ibid. 24.
69 Ibid. 31.
but by perfect imitation of it she conquers the best society. The irony is that her ascent in society is not characterized by any inner cultivation.

In focusing on appearances, on the visible indications of social power, Undine again perfectly represents her era. As has been said earlier, the New York elite in the last decades of nineteenth century was changing from aristocratic in nature to a democratic one. The aristocratic elite, where the wealth and status was hereditary, was being confronted with a new class of successful entrepreneurs, who had acquired their great amounts of money through their own efforts. Lionel Trilling in his chapter on *Manners, Morals, and the Novel* talks about money creating a fluent society, where the dominant classes frequently change. He says that “In a shifting society great emphasis is put on appearance [...] status in a democratic society is presumed to come not with power but with the tokens of power.”70

### 3.4. Divorce as ‘the custom of the country’

Divorce, which Undine brings with her from the west, is perhaps the phenomenon most profoundly alien to the feelings of the traditionalists in New York society. Several decades earlier, in *The Age Of Innocence*, Ellen’s family preferred her staying married to a notoriously abusive husband rather than staining the family name with the scandal of divorce. The history of Undine is a series of divorces and re-marriages, starting with the aristocratic Ralph Marvell, then a French Marquis de Chelles, to finally settle with a railroad billionaire Elmer Moffat. She is acting on the principle that she’d boldly presented to her astonished audience in the old house at Washington Square: “Out in Apex, if a girl marries a man

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who don’t come up to what she expected, people consider it’s to her credit to want to change.”  

The more liberal approach towards women’s sexuality that a divorce implies would seem beneficial in contrast to the severe imitations of the older system. But Wharton shows that by exchanging the feminine, matriarchal values of purity and refinement for money which was an exclusively male domain to pursue, the new marriage and social systems brought the male and female worlds no closer to each other. Charles Bowen, in *The Custom of The Country*, elaborates on how the crucial problem of American society is that the moneymaking male, although lavishing fortune on his wife, is in fact indifferent to her:

The real paradox is the fact that the men who make, materially, the biggest sacrifices for their women, should do least for them ideally and romantically. And what’s the result – how do the women avenge themselves? [...] I see their fallacious attempts to trick out the leavings tossed them by the preoccupied male – the money and the motors and the clothes – and pretend to themselves that that’s what really constitutes life?

This line of thought explains and effectively justifies divorce and re-marriage to a richer man as a natural step towards well-being and self-realization. In exchange for the bondage of non-material values of chastity and moral superiority, the woman has been assigned the role of establishing her personality solely through material wealth.

Bowen further compares the American society to the European:

“*The emotional center of gravity is not the same in the two hemispheres. In the effete societies it’s love, in our new one it’s business.*” He specifies that the real life of the American man is not in a woman’s drawing room but in his office. This seems to be the

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71 Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* 60.
72 Ibid. 132.
essence of Wharton’s complaint against American social life. The separation of the two worlds also results in keeping women thoroughly ignorant of the harsher realities of life outside their drawing room. It has been illustrated earlier that ignorance was traditionally regarded as an important quality of an American female. Wharton herself preferred the French model with the long established culture of a woman intellectually equal to the man. The salon, a French invention demonstrates this nature of social relations; maintained by the hostess, it was a space where men as well as women met for the purpose of unrestrained general conversation. Wharton found the civilized atmosphere of France so vital that she chose to spend the latter part of her life there. France is also the setting of her early novel The Reef, which introduces a rarely knowledgeable female protagonist, Sophy Viner. Her exceptional position within Wharton’s social world will be discussed in the following chapter.

4. ALTERNATIVES

Wharton doesn’t seem to propose a solution or an alternative to the unsatisfactory, even tragic state of affairs of her female characters. There is a note of pessimism and a certainty of defeat in most of her novels. The women rarely challenge the status quo; they are generally trying to achieve some kind of coexistence with it, and retain their self-integrity at the same time. There are exceptions, such as the characters of Lydia Tillotson in the short story Souls Belated or Mrs. Westall in The Reckoning, who consciously attempt a revolt and leave their conventional marriages, but only to resign and conform in the end. Lydia finds it impossible to live as a social outcast, and Mrs. Westall, faced with loneliness after her lover leaves her discovers the appeal of the established tradition of marriage, which previously she found to be confining. Undine Spragg, though she independently realizes herself in her pursuit of
wealth and power, functions more like a scarecrow than an ideal, with her emptiness and illusory successes.

Sophy Viner in the novel *The Reef* stands out in the line of Wharton's female major characters in that she was not, at any stage of her life, a lady of society. Perhaps this is the clue to her outstanding maturity. Carol Singley believes that the character of Sophy embodies Wharton's ideal of a female individuality. Sophy is independent, sexually experienced, and yet her instinctive moral consciousness and genuine purity exceeds that of those socially above her. Singley elaborates that through Sophy, Wharton is contemplating an alternative to the Christian model female, drawing on the antique goddess Sophia, associated with knowledge and life-giving force. In the novel, Sophy challenges the genteel conventionality of both Anna Leath and George Darrow. This central couple had known each other in New York where they both grew up. Anna had married abroad, and with her husband now dead, she is now about to marry her old lover. On his way to France to meet his fiancé, George Darrow has a brief affair with Sophy. Anna can't cope with Darrow's betrayal; although she is aware that she is sacrificing a chance of happiness for both herself and Darrow, she hasn't got the courage to abandon her conventional moral uprightness. Darrow is right when he wonders "whether the 'sheltered' girl's bringing-up might not unfit her for all subsequent contact with life?" He anticipates the obstacles Anna had brought with herself from her conservative New York background, but he is himself enslaved by the same conventions. After having made use of her, he views Sophy in the spirit of the patriarchal double standard: "For him, women are either "ladies" or not; "he had instinctively kept the two groups apart in his mind".

The failure of both Darrow and Anna to overcome their deeply rooted prejudices signals that to Wharton, those prejudices seemed

74 Singley 135.
still too powerful for any alternative approach to succeed. Singley defines the larger theme of The Reef as “the lack of a religious or spiritual system to accommodate female power and desire.”

Sophy is in the end fated to remain an outsider, but in the context of the procession of Wharton’s repressed heroines she comes closest to a model of feminine self-expression without guilt or dependence on patriarchal standards.

75 Singley 146.
CONCLUSION

This essay has looked at several of Wharton’s key works through the viewfinder of the concept of frustrated femininities. The primary proposition for this research has been that Wharton’s women protagonists come out as unsuccessful in their pursuit of life and happiness, while at the same time they are in most cases presented as products of their specific background. Accordingly, this essay looked at the societal structures as the major forces working against these women.

We have looked at various tropes of frustrated femininity including frustrated moral integrity in the old mercantile society as seen in the example of Lizzie and Ellen Olenska who defy the unmovable, dogmatic morality in place in that society. As Wharton shows this is fraught with consequences, in both cases leading to their expulsion for threatening the established moral codes. These moral codes, Wharton shows, while being held as the sacred cows of society are also exposed as being meretricious and artificial, imposing upon human relations in a correspondingly artificial way. In “Short-circuited femininities” we looked at how this extended to a futile dualism where, on the one hand, a woman could either follow the hypocritical puritanical position advocated by society and in doing so end up suppressing her feminine instincts. A further consequence of this sense of emotional starvation leads the women in Wharton’s work to perpetuate a false standard of chastity which they impose on others in order to secure their own sense of worth. In turn, Wharton shows that this is an effect resulting directly from a patriarchal value system which allows no other alternative for women. The double standard here is of course that men are free to pursue sexual relations prior to marriage and indulge in freedoms which they themselves legitimate, while women are forced to undergo a moral and sexual stagnation, unwittingly made to appear natural and immovable.
The old aristocratic society of New York was seen as having an overall deadening effect on the possibilities of expressions of femininities. This 'deadening' quality relates to the general nature of that particular society, which is that it operated along on a kind of inertia; formed some hundred years ago, the old aristocracy has arrived at a state where the main objective was to perpetuate itself, using codes of behavior and social intercourse which it has inherited from previous generations together with its wealth. These old-fashioned codes of behavior have been examined in the chapter on manners. We have seen that this code of manners was more about what was tacit and left unspoken than what was shown in actual fact. This tacitness was above all predicated upon a closing of one's eyes to the gamut of unpleasant realities holding people together.

Wharton's critical stance is double edged; through the works examined here we've seen that while Wharton finds fault with the Old Order, she simultaneously exposes the moral bankruptcy of the New Order predicated upon a life of conspicuous consumption. With the emergence of the nouveaux riche, though the constraints of the old social and moral mores are loosened and old repressions are beginning to breakdown, the irony of this, as Wharton shows, is that these repressions serve only to give way to yet another set of restrictions working against female individuality. The example of Lily Bart shows how the new materialism only inhibits any alternative female individuality not derived from the sheer getting of wealth. Lily’s ironic counterpart is Undine who does not strive for a personal sense of integrity as Lily does, but who pursues social standing and power with ruthless ambition which ensures Undine’s social mobility. In the end result, however, Undine is just as much a victim as Lily is for, as Wharton is at pains to exemplify, both women do not possess any control over their potential for self-realization. They are less agents of their destiny than subjects whose sphere of existence is defined and demarcated by the larger
social mechanisms of the exchange-value of capitalism. What is substituted in place of the false moral rectitude and repressions of the Old mercantile society is the shallow, promiscuous attitude and atomized existence under the new order.

At root, Wharton was unable to envision a healthier alternative lifestyle for an American woman owing precisely to the fact of the fundamental feature of American society lying in the unconditional separation of the male and female worlds, which is also the major deterrent for any such alternative to exist.
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CZECH SUMMARY

Zmařené projevy ženskosti a osobní integrity jako následek společenských konvencí newyorské elity v literárním díle Edith Wharton.

Tato práce se zabývá výběrem „společenské prózy“ E. Wharton a zkoumá vliv společenských zvyklostí na osobnostní vývoj jejich ženských postav. Výchozím bodem této reflexe je skutečnost, že hrdinky jsou představovány jako produkty kolektivního prostředí, ve kterém se pohybují a současně nikdy nedosáhnou životního uspokojení. Vliv společnosti se tedy jeví jako frustrující. Popisované prostředí se omezuje na elitní společnost města New York druhé poloviny 19. století. Takzvaná newyorská aristokracie, jejíž vliv sahá zhruba do roku 1880, se vyznačuje puritánským přístupem k ženské výchově a konvenční morálkou.

Na příkladě Lizzie Hazeldean z povídky New Year’s Day [Nový rok] a Ellen Olenske v Age of Innocence [Věk nevinnosti] jsme ukázali, že vlastní morální integrita hrdinek se dostává do rozporu s povrchním soudem společnosti, na jehož základě jsou obě kolektivně vyrženy a odsouzeny k životu v izolaci. O negativním vlivu puritánských norem na vývoj ženské identity svědčí příklad Charlotte a Delie z povídky The Old Maid [Stará panna]. Obě jsou obětí násilně potlačovaných emocí a sexuality vlivem diktátu společenského požadavku počestnosti. Ačkoli tento společenský imperativ zásadně a negativně postihuje ženskou populaci, je jí paradoxně také udržován. Tento paradox dokládáme na případech chování hrdinek. Ženská komunita si vytváří zmiňované hodnoty ctnosti a čistoty, protože jim patriarchální prostředí neumožňuje jiné formy seberealizace. Průvodním jevem těchto mechanizmů je dvojí norma aplikovaná na sexuální chování mužů a žen. Dopad
společenských konvencí konzervativního New Yorku má ubíjející efekt a brání přirozenému projevu ženské osobnosti.

Práce se dále věnuje společenským zvyklostem. Tato kategorie zahrnuje detaily, týkající se oblečení, gest i vystupování, které jsou chápány jako materiální projevy konvencí. Specifikum společenských mřavů newyorské aristokracie spočívá v upřednostňování kódovaných gest oproti otevřenosti. Tento komunikační systém zároveň přesně vymezuje hranice komunity a slouží tak k jejímu zachování a obraně vůči infiltraci nežádoucích jedinců.

Společenská elita New Yorku se na konci 19. století mění vlivem bohatých průmyslnických vrstev z amerického západu. Tito postupně pronikají do konzervativních kruhů a přinášejí s sebou nový hodnotový systém založený na vulgárním materialismu. Přesto, že uvolněný přístup k ženské sexualitě se zdá být blahodárným ve srovnání s předchozími přísnými pravidly, Wharton ukazuje, že kladení důrazu na materiální hodnoty nedává prostor žádnému kreativnějšímu a inspirativnějšímu rozvoji lidské osobnosti. Příkladem je hrdinka Lily Bart z románu The House Of Mirth [Dům radovánek], která v souboji o zachování vlastní integrity, tragicky podléhá tlakům právě se ustavující konzumní společnosti.

Poslední kapitola poukazuje na absenci alternativních či úspěšných řešení společenské existence a seberealizace žen v díle E. Wharton. Zdá se, že je to právě kontext americké společnosti, charakteristické striktním oddělením mužského a ženského životního prostoru, který toto řešení neumožňuje.