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A NEW MAN: MASCULINE CONFUSION AND STRUGGLE IN THE WORKS OF EDITH WHARTON

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Gary Crump

December 2008

A NEW MAN: MASCULINE CONFUSION AND STRUGGLE IN THE WORKS OF EDITH WHARTON

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A NEW MAN: MASCULINE CONFUSION AND STRUGGLE IN THE WORKS OF EDITH WHARTON

Gary Crump December 2008 89 pages

Directed by: Kelly Reames, Sandy Hughes, and Elizabeth Weston

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Edith Wharton's male characters offer an important commentary on the evolving situation of the man in American society. Wharton did not wish for women to usurp all social positions from men but rather to claim their rightful position alongside them. Characters such as Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth* and Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country* display the same characteristics of fear, passion, and vulnerability as do many of her primary female figures. Wharton's societal concerns do not merely extend to that of her own sex but to that of the male in society who struggled with his sexuality, his body, and his role in marriage.

This examination of masculinity within Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and "The Other Two" will connect Wharton to the evolving man and his identity crisis, as her male characters have been analyzed by critics far less than her female characters. Specific aspects of masculinity often overlooked in her works, such as homosexuality and effeminacy, will come to the forefront and place her work in the context of the rigid expectations for "real American men" at the turn of the century.

Introduction

Since the 19th century, feminists have sought to acquire equal rights and respect in political, occupational, and sexual arenas. Edith Wharton witnessed throughout her lifetime the formation of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), the National Women's Trade Union League (NWTUL), and the American Birth Control League (ABCL), all successful organizations that brought the women's movement to the forefront of controversy in America. Though many of her most memorable characters--Lily Bart, the Countess Olenska, and Undine Spragg among them--display the evolution of the American woman and her role in society, Wharton's male characters also indicate a struggle and a shift in masculinity and its definition in domesticity, in the workplace, in marriage, and in sexuality. Michael Kimmel claimed only 12 years ago that American men had no history of their gender until he published *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* in 1996. He said that previous works about men "do not explore how the experience of being a man, of *manhood*, structured the lives of the men who are their subjects, the organizations and institutions they created and staffed, the events in which they participated. American men have no history of themselves as *men*" (2). Now that such histories have been published, I will seek to explain how Edith Wharton's male characters exemplify the evolving gender roles and expectations for masculinity in American society.

The Feminized Man

The middle to latter nineteenth century saw the emergence of a culture that began to categorize and define men as "sissies," "faggots," and "fairies" if they did not act,

look, or work in a certain narrow fashion defined as "masculine" (Rotundo 275). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick believes that homosexuality and its behaviors undoubtedly had become easily-recognized and acknowledged, but she notes that perceptions of homosexuality changed drastically at the turn of the century. Sedgwick says,

> What *was* new from the turn of the century was the world-mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence. (2)

Though a terminology for sexuality had not fully emerged, heterosexual men now classified any "unmasculine" man as a homosexual in order to assert their own superiority as straight men. This extreme attention to dividing the effeminate from the masculine and homosexuality from heterosexuality resulted in increasingly strict, socially-constructed codes for masculinity.

Men no longer could rely as much on grueling manual labor to prove their physical strength and masculinity since the industrial revolution had provided machinery to do tasks formerly performed by hand. Many farmers lost their farms and could no longer support their families in the traditional American way: "In 1800 over 80 percent of American men had been farmers; by 1880 only one-half the nation's labor force was in agriculture" (Kimmel 82). The occupational shift's impact led more men to venture into the business world and, consequently, to a culture consumed with avarice and homosexual panic, a term that Edward J. Kempf coined in 1920 for one who acutely fears homosexuality within him or herself or within other people. Kimmel acknowledges that the disconnect for men caused by evolving gender roles in the workplace elicited the need for men to reassert their masculinity by separating themselves from "queers": "As the

nature of work changed and as women, immigrants, and black men 'invaded' men's spheres, masculinity was experienced as increasingly difficult to prove. Sexuality emerged as a central element of American manhood [. . . .] Homosexuality and effeminacy were thus added to the repertoire of men's anxieties" (99-100). Therefore, by alienating the effeminate man or singling him out with derogatory sexual terms such as "queer" or "fairy," heterosexual men could once again assume their superiority in the workplace in order to assert the suffering masculine image.

Queer Theory and Wharton

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick confronts the sexual and gender binaries that American men grappled with, such as masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual, in *Epistemology of the Closet*. According to Sedgwick,

> an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo-heterosexual definition; and it will assume that the appropriate place for that critical analysis to begin is from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory. (1)

By providing thorough analyses of terms and ideas such as homosexual panic and the sexual continuum, terms I will borrow for my own analysis, Sedgwick provides queer theorists and gender critics with a fuller terminology for discussing male sexuality. Her analysis also explains the outbreak of homosexual panic throughout American culture as society began to develop sexual terminology in order to form "hierarchies" of sexuality that placed heterosexuals at the top and other "deviant" sexualities as inferior. Her idea of a sexual continuum allows for various types of sexualities rather than the stereotypical binaries of homosexuality and heterosexuality. This notion of a sexual continuum relates

to characters such as Lawrence Selden, who does exhibit heterosexual tendencies and desires, while other tendencies render his sexuality ambiguous to the reader. For my own purposes, I will indicate that men such as Selden are not necessarily homosexual but may fall somewhere in between the polarities of heterosexual and homosexual on the continuum of sexuality.

After stating that the Victorians introduced the idea of "the bachelor," Sedgwick posits the notion that this figure allowed for writers experiencing homosexual panic to use a male character that "narrowed the venue, and at the same time, startlingly desexualized the question, of male choice" (188). A bachelor, unlike an unmarried woman, could get by without marriage far longer without much social criticism on the pretense that he enjoyed "studying life." The upper classes accepted bachelors more readily than did the middle and lower classes, which is why Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth* could experiment with women and avoid marriage fairly easily. Selden, though never married in the novel, conducts a somewhat scandalous affair with a married woman, and this aids in deterring any talk among his peers of the possibility of his homosexuality.

In a study of the history of bachelorhood in America, Howard Chudacoff notes changes in the average marrying age and the annual ratio of married men in America:

> The percentage of unmarried males aged fifteen and older had dropped to 34.1 in 1930, after peaking at 41.7 in 1890 and remaining relatively high at 38.7 in 1910. Marriage, it appeared, was coming back in style. Whereas just fifty-nine out of every one thousand American men of marrying age in 1890 had tied the knot during the year, the annual ratio rose to the mid-seventies during the 1920s [. . . .] Average age at marriage, which for men stood at 26.1 years in 1890, also declined, reaching 24.3 in 1930. (248)

According to these rates, bachelorhood would have been more acceptable for Lawrence Selden not only because of social status, but simply because of the increased popularity

of bachelorhood at the time, considering that fewer American men had married earlier in the century. Perpetual bachelorhood alone likely would not have evoked much worry among Selden's higher social circle although he does straddle the fence between the middle and leisure classes because of his occupation; therefore, I will argue that he exhibits other tendencies that may indicate an internal struggle with sexuality.

I approach the subject of Selden's sexuality in various ways, one of which connects him to a work by Wharton's mentor and close friend, Henry James. In Sedgwick's analysis of homosexual panic, she pinpoints John Marcher of James's "The Beast in the Jungle" as a prime example of an author who uses a character as a sort of "sexual anesthesia that was damaging to both its male subjects and its female non-objects" (188). Marcher's homosexual panic not only sends him into his self-relegated closet but also traps May Bartram, with whom he engages in an unconsummated love affair, inside along with him. Critics have often glossed over the possibility of homosexuality within the story, however, and this exemplifies a problematic trend that persisted within criticism until the emergence of queer theory. According to Sedgwick,

> one might have hoped that in criticism of [James's] work the possible differences of different erotic paths would not be so ravenously subsumed under a compulsorily--and hence, never a truly "hetero"--heterosexual model. With strikingly few exceptions, however, the criticism has actively repelled any inquiry into the asymmetries of gendered desire. (197)

Sedgwick accurately intimates here the previous critical tendency to assume a character lacks sexual desire altogether if the author does not vividly signify heterosexuality for that character. Furthermore, the socially constructed binaries of hetero- and homosexuality polarize sexuality to the extent of overlooking those who fall between those binaries, as Lawrence Selden likely does in *The House of Mirth*. Though I will argue that Selden exhibits homosexual tendencies and, therefore, may be homosexual, I

cannot assume that his tendencies automatically place him on the homosexual end of the spectrum. He does engage in "semi"-relationships with women, though another purpose could have led Selden to "experiment"; therefore, he could fall somewhere between the binaries rather than onto one or the other.

American society also considered men who engaged in certain occupations as effeminate or even homosexual regardless of personality or physical appearance, and Wharton's portrayal of male artists Claud Walsingham Popple and Ralph Marvell typifies these stereotypes. Michael Davitt Bell addresses this difficulty that nearly all male writers of the time shared: the social scorning of the male artist. Bell says that realist writer William Dean Howells fought the notion that a male's artistic nature or occupation equaled homosexuality:

> It is surely no coincidence that Howells came to associate realism with masculine "normalcy," and to distinguish it from concern for "art," at a time when modern stereotypes of male sexual identity --rigidly differentiating "effeminate" homosexuality from "virile" heterosexuality--were being solidified into what sociologists call master status traits. (37)

Just as Howells fought this stigma, Wharton's Ralph Marvell and Claud Walsingham Popple of *The Custom of the Country* fall under the critical gaze of society, especially women, as artists were stereotypically viewed as effeminate, homosexual, and even lazy, unable to make a living for their families. Unfortunately, as Bell signifies, the social equating of art with homosexuality too frequently led to the artist's downfall, self-loathing, and inherent belief in the sinfulness of art.

For men of the arts in the latter 19th and early 20th century, art became something to dissociate oneself from in order to avoid this sort of stigma. Bell says that William Dean Howells's "discussions of realism are permeated with attacks on 'art' and the 'artistic.' Might we not reasonably infer from this that Howells *needed* to dissociate his

identity as a writer from its 'artistic' implications [and that this affected the approach he took to his writing]?" (22). Though social pressures on the artist slowly declined from when Howells began his career, artists like Popple still would have struggled to retain a masculine identity when *The Custom of the Country* appeared in 1913.

Although studies of Wharton's male characters require an eye to social class, Erving Goffman clarifies that an overarching stereotype for the "real man" still persists today, though, I would argue, not nearly as stringently as for men of the early twentieth century. Goffman says,

> In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports [. . . .] Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself--during moments at least--as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior. (qtd. in Kimmel 5)

This stereotype for masculinity that requires great intelligence, socially-acceptable employment, and an attractive physical exterior does not differ at all from the one promoted in popular culture of Wharton's time. Radical health reformers around America rose in popularity and emphasized the importance of not merely physical health, but physical beauty, along with the myriad expectations that Goffman mentions here.

One of Wharton's most tragic characters, Ralph Marvell, falls prey to these rising social standards for masculinity and commits suicide. Having married Undine Spragg because of her physical beauty, Ralph eventually realizes that Undine married him not for love, but rather in order to maneuver her way into society. Once he discovers her affair with Peter Van Degen, Marvell collapses without putting forth much of a fight to save his marriage, which would have been the patriarchal, masculine thing to do in order to maintain control over his wife. Instead, Ralph assumes the feminine role of mother to

Paul, a responsibility in which Undine never takes much interest. Though he loves his son, Ralph finds himself too consumed with his defeat in marriage. Once Undine attempts to blackmail him into giving her money to support her affair with Van Degen by claiming that she will take Paul from him unless he complies with her monetary demands, Ralph escapes his emasculation with suicide, a vivid commentary from Wharton on the state of which end will win in the competition of romantic love (Ralph) and business "love" (Undine). This ending parallels Lily Bart's eventual demise in *The House of Mirth*, though in a slightly different way, as she cannot acquire the financial backing--at least not respectfully--required to fit the expectations of the social elite. Wharton has indicated that *both* sexes struggled with gender evolutions at the turn of the century, and this confusion led to changes in the expectations for marriage in America.

An understanding of the New Woman illuminates one of the primary reasons for the widespread loss of masculine identity among American men. Not every American woman subscribed to this revolutionary model of femininity, but those who did sought independence from patriarchal confines within marriage, sexuality, the workplace, and the political arena. More and more of these New Women proved that they could not only acquire employment but succeed within that previously male-only realm. Catherine Lavender says that "the percentage of female professionals reached an historic peak in the early twentieth century [. . . .] Women in the professions were only 6.4% of non-agricultural female work force in 1870 but were 10% in 1900 and 13.3.% in 1920, representing almost one million women" (1). Homosociality in the workplace declined as a result of these increasing numbers; men now felt encroached upon by women both in the workplace and in domesticity. Yet, the homosocial bonding that men continued to

fight for presented still another problem that goes back to the evolution of sexuality at the turn of the century: "Because the paths of male entitlement, especially in the nineteenth century, required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds, an endemic and eradicable state of [. . .] homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement" (Sedgwick 185). Wherever men turned, even in their traditional friendships with their own sex, they faced challenges to their sexuality and identity as men.

Masculine identities suffered even in higher society occupations--not just in the middle class--and this could indicate another reason that Lawrence Selden grappled with his identity, not to mention why he never discusses his work at any point in the novel, something that nearly every man did in order to assert his masculinity among his peers. In the field of law, Selden would have experienced a shift in the lawyer's possibilities to assert his masculinity and achieve distinction. On this occupational shift, Henry Dwight Sedgwick says,

> The older order [of law], when distinguished orators deemed their most important moments spent in arguing before court or jury, was passing away; now the important lawyers were closeted in inner rooms, guarded by office boys, clerks, stenographers, who only admitted officials of great corporations--[. . .] for any schemes to obtain wealth. (*Memoirs* 185).

Regardless of Selden's sexuality, the effeminate shadow cast upon his field could easily have aided in causing an internal homosexual panic and confusion.

While men like Selden experienced changes at work, they also met new challenges with gender roles at home and in relationships. Undine Spragg's lovers and husbands (Moffat [before they meet again in New York], Marvell, Van Degen, and de Chelles) succeed for the most part in their occupational fields, but they all experience tremendous difficulty in dealing with their romantic relationships with her. These men

all assume a patriarchal stance and view women as art objects for their viewing pleasure and for their possession. They do not realize that this new sort of independent woman, especially the extreme sort like Undine, will stop at nothing to fulfill her own desires with little to no regard to theirs; the man no longer remains the center of the feminine world as before. Only Elmer Moffat, of the male characters I examine, can tame this new form of businesswoman:

> Unlike Undine's prior husbands, who purchase her solely for their own personal viewing pleasure and thereby evince a proprietary capitalist ethic, Moffatt puts Undine to work, using her social connections to help him increase and diversify his portfolio. Only a properly managed Undine, like a properly managed Teddy Wharton, promises material growth. (Patterson 217)

It is this extreme business-like approach that many women applied to marriage that raised obvious concern for Wharton. Moffatt, who schemes and blackmails in order to achieve social position, now utilizes Undine's own independence, determination, and business savvy, however troublesome and deceitful it may be, in order to match wits and profit from this business-like approach to marriage.

Masculinity and Marriage

Scholars have nearly exhausted the topic of marriage within Wharton's body of work, especially in regard to her greater-known publications, but they primarily have looked at marriage with an eye to the eventual lifting of feminine oppression within the patriarchal attitudes of a previously male-dominated marriage market and to how women's roles and attitudes consequently changed. In this patriarchal system, "the desire to marry and the belief that a woman's social status came not from the exercise of her own talents and efforts but from her ability to attract a competent male protector were as universal among lower-class and farm women as among middle- and upper-class urban

women" (Smith-Rosenberg 100). By the time Wharton published *The Custom of the Country* in 1913, divorce and manipulation had become an important tool for many women's social success, while this would have been considered much more disgraceful less than a decade earlier for Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*. Now, women like Undine Spragg, fueled by the previously masculine notion of capitalism, beguiled and used men like Ralph Marvell for social mobility. Debra Ann MacComb says that "Wharton's deeply ironic novel proves that divorce is the logical mechanism for market expansion, providing women with the means to forge nuptial careers based not on a single liaison but on successive--and even more successful--unions" (765). Many American women now began to view men not as protectors or as objects of romantic affection, but rather as dispensable objects easily jettisoned once their potential for aiding their wives' social climbing had been exhausted. In order to achieve any sort of social identity acceptable among the upper classes, the woman, like Undine, must become a chameleon who changes with the fashions and adapts her personality to coincide with her social atmosphere. "Undine's ceaseless search both to have and to be 'the best' the market has to offer," says MacComb, "conditions her to seek divorce when marriage fails to provide what she believes" will satisfy the requirements for a suitable social position (780).

It is Undine's sort of deceitful usage of the divorce market and its affect on men that concerned Wharton when she underwent her own divorce the same year of the novel's publication, according to MacComb, as she worried that she would be viewed as a heartless wife who abandons her husband under false pretenses in order to reach another level of social recognition. Her biographers "suggest that she feared her divorce would, by force of convention, take on a melodramatic tone, with Teddy cast as the

abused and helpless victim of her frivolous whim" (MacComb 766). In *Custom of the Country*, though, Wharton portrays both men and women as guilty of beguilement, blackmail, and corruption in both business and marital spheres; perhaps she used such a novel to reconcile her own guilt or fear that the public would label her as an Undine who grew weary of her husband in favor of someone new to revive her sexuality or her social standing, though it is obvious she had already solidified the latter. Lily Bart also mirrors Wharton's own struggle to find fulfillment in relationships and how Wharton's relationship with Morton Fullerton affected her view of marriage, men, and sexuality[1]. Fullerton allowed Wharton to fulfill sexual desires that she had not experienced in her marriage with Teddy Wharton, but Fullerton's bisexuality and evident aversion to monogamy led to the downfall of the relationship--once again, love failed Edith Wharton.

Wharton's close friendships with bachelors or homosexuals, coupled with the disastrous results of her romantic relationships and the poor example of a relationship set by her parents, resulted, according to Holbrook, in characters such as Lawrence Selden, Vance in *The Gods Arrive*, and Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, all men who become entangled in social expectations for masculinity in regard to sexuality and marriage (9). Concerning how Wharton's own tragic love life affected her male characters, Holbrook says that, after failures with Fullerton and Teddy, "thus, she has herself a predeliction [sic] for the woman who is a sexual adventuress, while feeling that sex is dangerous and deathly" (15). Her frustration with socially acceptable gender roles and sexuality becomes apparent via characters such as Archer and Ralph Marvell. For

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[1] *The House of Mirth* was published shortly before Wharton's relationship with Fullerton. *Ethan Frome* could more accurately be considered a product of her failed liaison with him since it was written well after the beginning of their relationship.

Archer, love comes at a price too high to pay, as he passes over his love for Ellen Olenska in order to marry May Welland and avoid alienation from the New York's upper echelon of society, while Marvell fails in love because of effeminacy and because the feminine usurpation of patriarchy has reached an extreme level beyond what Wharton wished for her fellow woman.

Other critics have applied Gothic concepts to Wharton's work in order to interpret the failure of masculinity. In Gothic literature, the male typically views the woman as art object, and the woman allows herself to become what the man envisions. In Lily Bart's case, the *tableau vivant* indicates her willingness to fulfill Gothic expectations of femininity while she concurrently refuses to fall victim to society's demands that she marry for money rather for love. Lawrence Selden struggles internally with his place among the socially elite and consequently creates his fictitious, Gothic-like "Republic of the Spirit" in order to envision a place of freedom for himself (and Lily) "from everything--from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents" (*House* 55); yet, he tells Lily that few married people dwell in his fictitious republic. Kathy Fedorko argues that Wharton uses the Gothic dream-like state in her work to deal with gender issues and to imagine a merging of the sexes:

> Lily admires Selden's notion of success in life as freedom from all of life's exigencies in a 'republic of the spirit' because she has similar pretensions to life without responsibility and vulnerability. Their philosophical interchange about the republic, society, and values sounds like a single voice engaged in point/counterpoint. (38)

Wharton certainly believed in the women's cause, but Fedorko alludes here to Wharton's sympathetic nature toward both sexes and to her preference for a blending of the sexes rather than the separate spheres promoted in Gothic literature. Contrary to the common belief that Wharton sought independence of men for women, Fedorko implies in her

analysis that Lily and Selden, and men and women in a more general sense, can only understand each other and find happiness when the masculine and feminine binaries fall from their minds.

Although they both acknowledge a desire to shed the traditionally polar gender divisions in favor of Selden's Republic of the Spirit, neither character endures long enough to follow through with this realization. The "word" that goes unsaid upon Lily's death represents the "ghost, as spirit, lingering 'vague and luminous' beyond thought, beyond the rational," as rationalization "puts [Selden] in the company of the 'rational' men who people Wharton's Gothic short stories and exemplifies the tragic limitation of such reason" (Fedorko 47). This word, as I will argue, signifies Selden's unsaid truth: that he is not heterosexual. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says that "even at an individual level, there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them" (67-8). Selden, in my view, *is* rational and caring, despite what some critics argue, because he doesn't choose to hurt Lily by marrying her--he realizes his own unsatisfactory nature according to the heterosexual views of the time. Throughout the novel, Selden also feels sorry for Lily because of her naiveté and intent on bettering her social position although she can never bring herself to commit such a crime against authentic romance; therefore, silence, even down to the notorious "word" at the end, offers him the opportunity to hurt Lily less and the possibility of hiding his confusion for an indefinite duration of time.

Annette Larson Benert examines how Wharton uses transitional spaces within her work, and her theory can apply to the relationship between Lily and Selden, as many of

their more important encounters occur within these transitional spaces, areas that were considered ungentlemanly and feminine according to Howard Chudacoff. Benert says that "all the crucial events [in *The House of Mirth*] occur in the transitional spaces, on the stairs and thresholds, in the trains and carriages, that mark the modes and margins between city and country, public and private, outside and inside" (27). Meeting in liminal spaces indicates, therefore, the convergence of the two sexes into one. Furthermore, Benert's theory applies to the feeling of being between worlds that Selden experiences with his sexuality. She also asserts that the "normal" woman controlled the interior of a home while the "normal" man controlled the exterior, but, for Wharton, the normal did not always surface in her characters. For example, Selden serves tea and cake to Lily when she visits his apartment, a ritual normally performed by a woman, or a male or female servant, regardless of location. In this instance, masculinity and femininity combine. These smaller acts of gender role switching, though not proof of a homosexual orientation, hint at least to an effeminacy that would have been perceived as unusual for the time period.

Considering that an emphasis on the body and appearances persists today with reality television shows and magazines like *Vogue*, *GQ*, and *Cosmopolitan*, much criticism has focused on Wharton's commentary on art and the artist. In fact, Americans all too often blame much of the current obsession with the body on this generation, but a closer look at the turn of the century can reveal the origins of today's Abercrombie and Fitch ads or the TV shows about men and women losing weight or getting makeovers. Lily Bart and Claud Walsingham Popple epitomize the roles of the woman as art object and the artist as crowd-pleaser. Cynthia Griffin Wolff pinpoints the criticism that

Wharton offers on the art of the time period by citing Peter Van Degen's statement in *The Custom of the Country* that artists must capture a man's likeness but absolutely must embellish a woman's portrait when necessary in order for anyone to want it. Wolff calls this desire to manipulate appearances in female portraits

> a damning indictment of both artist and patron, for what the society of New York wants is, in the long run, deception; and it is, apparently, deception that the artist was willing (consciously or not) to provide--the pleasing allusion that the *idealized* rendering of the women who were painted was in fact *realistic* representation. (322)

It is this dichotomy of real and ideal that prepares Wharton's men for confusion and, in certain cases, death. Selden, for example, becomes deluded by Lily's *tableau vivant*. Tricia Farwell says that "it takes this spectacle of idealized love and temptation for Selden to awaken to his love for her" (37). She says that Selden appreciates Lily more this way because she has now become static, unable to move or to change (37). Though not stated explicitly, Farwell has named Selden as yet another enemy to the woman's cause, though Selden has frequently been viewed by readers and critics alike as the hero of the novel and the closest to satisfactory of any man Lily encounters. According to this theory, Wharton has indicated that even the few men who claim to support the evolution of gender roles as Selden does in his Republic still subconsciously subscribe to the popular notion of the woman as art object and possession.

As Rotundo indicates, men began to develop an interest in their bodies similar to the typically feminine desires for outward beauty, thus creating a more "feminine" man: "Men of the late nineteenth century went a step beyond Daniel Eddy's assertion that a strong body was the foundation for a strong character; they treated physical strength and strength of character as the same thing" (223). Magazines, such as popular health reformer Bernarr Macfadden's *Physical Culture*, began to display images of muscular,

virile men, implying that these qualities defined true masculinity, according to Mark Whalan. With new standards for masculinity and the male body, many men found themselves devalued in the public eye--especially under the feminine gaze--if they did not fit into this narrow stereotype. In my analysis, I examine how body image and sex appeal indicate, in part, effeminacy and the worth of the man in Wharton's works. Haskett, Alice's first husband in "The Other Two," looks much different than her second husband; while he wears glasses, looks mousy and timid, and dresses "shabbily," Varick, the second husband and second rung on her social climbing ladder, looks physically stronger and handsome. She finally marries Waythorn on her way to the top because of his financial status and more solid occupation, indicating that, eventually, money trumps physical appearances, despite its importance at the time. Popple also does not look the part of the American man, as his more delicate and meticulous manner and appearance adds to his effeminacy and possible homosexuality.

As I have already indicated throughout my analysis of and connections with the history of masculinity and critical theories on Wharton, I will seek to explain how her masculine characters evolve and suffer as a result of masculine stereotyping and how gender roles change as a result of he New Woman movement. Little to no critics have extensively analyzed the possibility of homosexuality within Wharton's works, and I will examine various male characters who present valid cases for intermediate sexualities. Anytime someone or something threatens a person's identity, confusion, anger, and, more often than not, change becomes apparent within the recipient of the threat. Not only do the characters evolve throughout her career, but Wharton herself evolves, as well. Early in her career, she considers more the plight of the helpless, naïve woman, such as Evelina

Bunner, who easily falls prey to the deceit and selfishness of the dominating, quick-witted man. Bunner of *Bunner Sisters* (written 1892, but not published until 1916) falls in love with Mr. Remy simply because of his gender, not because of his personality; when she marries him, she knows virtually nothing of him. Remy eventually abandons her and leaves her destitute and dying of tuberculosis, and he suffers no consequences fior his horrible deed. At the conclusion of the story, Evelina's sister must close their business and look for work in order to survive alone. Eventually, however, Wharton's men will walk their own lonely road, trying to find their roles in society, at home, and in marriage as they no longer can recognize the woman they once dominated, just as the Bunner Sisters haplessly fall in defeat due to their naiveté and confusion in regard to the true nature of men and social expectations for women.

In order to demonstrate how this sort of innocent, helpless, and subservient female figure of the early to mid-nineteenth century evolves from dominated to dominator and how the man consequently falls under the scrutiny of society, I will examine a selection of Wharton's works that feature vivid and varying portraits of masculinity. In each work, at least one male character suffers from the threat of emasculation and eventually succumbs to the woman and to social expectations in order to avoid conflict with society or further internal confusion. After considering the possibility of homosexuality/homosexual panic within *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, I will connect this fear within men of effeminacy and homosexuality to their evolving roles within marriage and how effeminate appearances, mannerisms, and actions affected women's attitudes toward these men and their potential for marriage through analyses of "The Other Two" and *The Custom of the Country*. This study does not,

however, claim that homosexuality definitely exists within each text; it merely considers the possibility and explains how the characters fit the portrait of the stereotypical homosexual or effeminate man at the turn of the century.

One fact that may surprise Wharton's readers today is that men, though much less in need of the closet now than then, still fight the same stereotyping that Popple does as an artist or Marvell does as a writer. Today, we often assume the homosexuality--or at least bisexuality--of men in the arts; men who write poetry or dance *must* be gay, right? Surface readings of Wharton's texts can reveal quite easily the stereotyping of Popple, as even his friends laugh at him and talk about him when outside of his presence; yet, they also admire him because, I argue, he displays effeminate qualities yet provides such a valuable service to the elite in society. By painting "realistic" portraits and masking his subjects' flaws, Popple can use the importance of business in America to eclipse the homosexual tendencies that society found so displeasing.

This marks an improvement on the harsh battle against sexual stereotyping that William Dean Howells fought as a writer when the realistic literary movement began earlier in the 19th century, but Wharton's characterization of Popple both reinforces the incorrect stereotypes that embattled male writers before her had attempted to eradicate. At the same time, Wharton offers a commentary on the attitudes of upper society. For Popple, effeminacy marks him as an outsider among the elite of New York although they include him and call him "friend," and this leads him to constantly attempt to assert the masculinity that he realizes he needs to gain full respect even from his "friends." It is this difficulty that every man encountered if he lacked even the slightest aspect of acceptable masculinity, even in the more relaxed upper classes. The middle classes, however,

looked at the effeminate man even more harshly. Had Popple attempted to act, dress, and provide his artistic services in the same manner, his career would have met a quick demise.

Ultimately, the following chapters will show how the effeminacy and homosexual tendencies within men led to their downfall throughout Wharton's fiction. They reflect the pity that Wharton once bestowed earlier in her career on the Bunner sisters as women: the feminine, unassertive male who does not conform to social standards will not survive unless he compromises himself and constructs a closet in which to hide himself, just as she believed her father to have continually hidden himself from everyone around him. She doesn't present an angry tone toward men, but, after her negative portraits of masculinity from her father, her husband, and her lover, Wharton probably began to see these men as negative influences on women and on society. Perhaps Wharton herself did not realize fully what caused men like her father, Selden, or Marvell to fail, and her characters never appear to fully realize their own reasons for failure. The truth, whatever that may be, remains unsaid, as with the "word" that passes between Selden and Lily upon her suicide, while Marvell realizes far too late that he has failed not because Undine did not love him, but rather because he allowed her to enslave him and capture his sense of masculine self-identity. This loss also results in suicide, a mirror to Lily's loss of upper-class femininity by her inability to marry for money.

Unfortunately, if these men lived today, they would quite possibly fall into the same traps that society and women set for them a century ago, as effeminate and homosexual men in society still have not found the freedom and respect that they lacked in Wharton's day, and the heterosexual man of the 21st century still must fit nearly the

exact same social requirements for masculinity that surfaced fully at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Chapter 1: The Coming (Out) of Man

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states that critics of Henry James, a homosexual and one of the greatest influences on Wharton's career, perhaps "have been motivated in this inactive curiosity [regarding homosexuality] by a desire to protect James from homophobic misreadings in a perennially repressive sexual climate" (197). While many queer theory readings of James's work have emerged since and because of Sedgwick's criticism, Wharton's critics also have mostly glossed over the possibility of homosexuality in most of her work, choosing rather to analyze characters from a heterosexual standpoint, perhaps, as Sedgwick says, to preserve her reputation as merely a critic of marriage and women's oppression. Though critics do not necessarily suspect Wharton herself of being a lesbian, introducing homosexuality as a theme within her work would still prove shocking for Wharton's readers. Unfortunately, by not examining the possibility of homosexual panic within either writer's work, critics perpetuate through their criticism the repressed silence regarding homosexuality in their culture at the turn of the 20th century. This chapter will seek to explain the presence of the homosexual, his role, and his stereotypes in late 19th and early 20th century America as seen through sexually ambiguous characters--Lawrence Selden and Claud Walsingham Popple--in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*. While Selden experiments unsuccessfully with Lily in grappling with his own sexual confusion, Popple unabashedly fits the description of a stereotypical gay man but avoids becoming an outcast because of the benefits derived from his presence in high society.

Lawrence Selden, Lily Bart's friend and only true confidant in *The House of Mirth*, remains shrouded in a veil of mystery regarding his romantic affairs and sexual

desires, but answers never surface by the conclusion of the novel. Wharton withholds a vital bit of information in the final chapter when Selden "knelt by the bed and bent over [Lily], draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear" (256). Traditionally, readers have believed Selden to have been the typical heterosexual bachelor, somewhat desirous of romance but simply not ready for commitment. His "word which made all clear" indicates that he has until then withheld something from Lily, but what? The words "I Love You?" Or some other truth about himself? An internal battle with his sexuality could explain Selden's conflicting actions and emotions throughout the novel. Selden cannot flee from his self-created closet, nor can he allow Lily to inhabit it with him; he withholds the truth about his homosexuality because of his sexual confusion and the anxieties of losing a friend over his hidden truth. As Sedgwick states, "When gay people in a homophobic society come out [. . .] especially to parents or spouses, it is with the consciousness of a potential for serious injury that is likely to go in both directions" (80)--not only would Selden risk his friendship and position in society by coming out, but he also knows that his revelation to Lily, who loves him, likely would drive her further into her apparent depression as she loses friend after friend because of her decline in financial status throughout the novel.

David Holbrook alludes to Selden's possible homosexuality by saying that "Wharton, because of her strong attachment to her father, saw men in general as being non-committal, self-protective, unresponsive to women, even possibly homosexual (though Selden has already had an adulterous affair [. . .])" (22). In Selden, traces of her father, George Frederic Jones, surface, as Wharton once said that she believed her father to have hidden something from the world throughout his life, that he was "'lonely' and

'haunted by something always unexpressed'" (Benstock 22), just as Selden keeps few friends and appears conflicted throughout the novel. Wharton blamed her mother Lucretia for stifling her father's love of poetry. She once said of her father, "'I imagine there was a time [. . .] when his rather rudimentary love of verse might have been developed had he had any one with whom to share it'" (Benstock 22). Wharton never appears to suspect that her father also possessed homosexual tendencies, but this personal family history illuminates the sympathy with which Wharton would approach a man who cannot connect to others because of desires neither Lucretia, Edith, nor anyone else understood during her father's life. Though she could not ascertain the nature of her father's hidden self, she would, however, explore such attitudes and tendencies mentioned by Holbrook in order to better understand the life of an unhappy, misunderstood man at the *fin de siècle* in American society.

From the moment Wharton introduces him, Selden displays a lackadaisical, disinterested attitude toward women. In the beginning pages, he admires Lily's exterior "as a spectator" (6), yet Wharton indicates no sexual attraction here. She does not even indicate whether or not he enjoyed her personality, her exterior, or both: "As a spectator, he had always enjoyed Lily Bart; and his course lay so far out of her orbit that it amused him to be drawn for a moment into the sudden intimacy which her proposal implied" (6). The passage emphasizes that he could not ever be with Lily, possibly because of his lack of wealth or because of his sexual orientation. He says to her after asking her to come up to his apartment, "'Oh, I am not dangerous'" (7), while Wharton also says that "he could never be a factor in her calculations" (7). A few paragraphs later, Selden expresses disgust over the "sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women

struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans"; he follows this assessment by associating terms such as "crudity" and "average" with these women--other than Lily, Selden does not express any sort of true attraction at all to any other female. Wharton clearly indicates Selden's slight distaste for Lily's personality and lack of originality as a woman, while also showing that Selden, at times, views her as quite unique. Selden, from the start, does not display any sort of real romantic attraction even to Lily--his opinion fluctuates, and he only notices the exquisiteness of her beauty and how she appears as rather an *objet d'art* instead of a woman. His attraction does not originate or develop as that of other men such as Gus Trenor and Simon Rosedale, who would have been, in that time period, considered "real" men because of their social standing, monetary worth, and pronounced heterosexuality.

Despite his sexual confusion, Selden does not remain oblivious to expectations set before him by both Lily and New York society. Selden recognizes Lily's romantic interest in him; therefore, he chooses to engage in a relationship with Bertha Dorset instead to both avoid damaging his friendship with Lily and to fit the expectations of the male in New York society. Though adulteries throughout Wharton's work nearly always receive scorn for such scandal in cases such as Julis Beaufort (*Age of Innocence*), Ethan Frome (*Ethan Frome*), or Stephen Glennard (*The Touchstone*), Selden could avoid some of this criticism both because of his bachelorhood and because of Bertha Dorset's poor reputation. Judy Trenor verifies this during a discussion with Lily: "Every one knows you're a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha; but then you're not nasty. And for always getting what she wants in the long run, commend me to a nasty woman" (37). Judy also implies that George Dorset serves as a doormat for his wife's "nastiness."

Selden would be aware of Bertha's reputation and recognizes that, with her reputation already highly tarnished, she could do as she pleased without creating a great stir. Thus, by engaging in a relationship with Bertha, Selden could avoid scandal while also appearing heterosexual by being sexually involved with a woman. He doesn't conduct such an experiment in heterosexuality with Lily because she does not live in such a scandalous, devious manner as Bertha and would likely eventually become a victim of the experiment rather than a beneficiary as he would.

Tricia Farwell, in analyzing Selden's romantic endeavors, claims, however, that Selden also attempts to kindle a similar "sentimental experiment" with Lily, which she defines as "an inconsequential version of love [for Selden]. It allows for the people involved, Bertha and Selden, to play at the game of love while maintaining an emotional distance" (Farwell 24). Selden "has the tendency to believe that relationships are trivial as he attempts to play a game of love with Lily so that he can avoid, and perhaps even escape, a spiritual union with her" (23). This argument could be fleshed out a bit more, however, as Selden obviously cares deeply for Lily throughout the novel, not to mention the extreme dismay he experiences upon her death. While later correctly stating that both Selden and Lily eventually desire a spiritual union, Farwell considers only the romantic aspect of such a union, citing Lily's "earthly corruption" by society and Selden's "[fluctuating] desire to make her into another sentimental experiment" (25) as his reasons for rejecting the romantic relationship that she so obviously desires. If Selden does desire a "spiritual union," then this could indicate that he wishes to merely have a non-sexual union with Lily. Illustrating her belief that *both* characters desire a *romantic* spiritual union, the following passage from *Love and Death in Edith Wharton's Fiction*

demonstrates Farwell's mistake in blending Lily's emotions with Selden's, rather than appropriately analyzing them separately:

> If one looks closely, one finds elements of [Selden's 'Republic of the Spirit'] in various descriptions where there is a chance for lovers to meet in an ideal union, such as the feeling of flying high, or being above the rest of the world looking down upon them. [. . .] For Lily and Selden the entrance to the Republic is on the hilltop at Bellomont" (25).

Despite the accuracy of her statement, Farwell fails to mention how this union on the hill affects Lily far more than it does Selden. Furthermore, Selden's disgust with Lily when she is most beautiful and alive (i.e. the beginning of the novel when he observes Lily at the train station) indicates more than simply that he thinks her like most "other" women; it also can indicate his lack of sexual attraction to women, as it appears a bit odd that he would scorn a woman for her beauty and sexuality if he, in fact, were heterosexual.

Selden and Lily often appear in liminal spaces away from everyone else, such as their meeting on the hill, indicative of both characters' ultimate separation from society. Though he does not support the strict codes and expectations resulting from social stratification, he does acknowledge that he has learned the art of moving gracefully between the workplace and the elite class's social scene. Lily, however, never masters this concept, even after acquiring employment, and eventually commits suicide in order to avoid falling further into the outskirts of "good" society. Annette Larson Benert claims that occurrences within these liminal, more private spaces are the most important for understanding Lily's character. On the hill, Selden discusses his "republic of the soul," a place described ambiguously as one of "personal freedom" (55), but "[without] many married people in it" (56). He asks Lily if she will "become one of [them]," (55) but the group of people to whom he refers remains shrouded by his usual air of mystery. In comparing Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* to *The House of Mirth*, Benert says that,

> like Madame Merle discussing clothes with Isabel Archer, Lily knows the speciousness, even the hypocrisy, of Selden's republic. Yet she cherishes this ideal as her only moral reference point, as what has 'kept me from really becoming what many people thought me,' knowing it to be a freedom from the very conditions that make civilization possible, a freedom the novel consistently undercuts. (18)

Not only do both Selden and Lily relish their time away from the rest of the group, Selden even creates his own imaginary republic that allows few people in another effort toward separation. Benert states that such an imaginary place keeps Lily from deviating from her morality, but the republic conversely hinders Selden. If Selden actually thinks of homosexuals when he speaks of a republic full of unmarried people, then the republic to which he says he belongs would be the force *holding him back* from pursuing his love for Lily, a republic that has proved an escape from the society that has forced him to "[try] to remain amphibious [, a society that is] all right as long as one's lungs can work in another air" (56). Although this statement could apply to his ability to blend in with both the working class and high society, it perhaps means more than that. He could also refer to a sexual façade that he employs in order to avoid controversy or scandal, but the novel never delves into Selden's life in the workplace. The reader, therefore, does not see how amphibious he becomes, nor do we see how he interacts with working-class men on the job. This focus on Selden's interactions with women and domesticity may indicate that the feminine, domestic, and often liminal areas in which he so often appears throughout the novel are his primary domains, while he must change himself--or become "amphibious"-- with the working-class and other men to disguise the truth about his effeminacy and sexuality.

Still, Farwell's argument holds some truth, but not necessarily in the way she intends. When Selden thinks periodically of testing and experimenting with Lily, he

could quite easily mean that he actually wants to test *himself*. As has already been established, Selden does not express true sexual desire for any other woman in the novel, not even Bertha, and he appears at times startled at his attraction to Lily. Interestingly, Selden expresses sadness during their encounter on the hill over Ned Silverton, a poet who engages in scandalous affairs with Carrie Fisher and Bertha Dorset, saying that "he's really too good to be used to refurbish anybody's social shabbiness. There's a lad just setting out to discover the universe. Is n't it a pity he should end by finding it in Mrs. Fisher's drawing room?" (57). In Lily's response, she then indicates that Silverton writes poetry, often viewed as an occupation or pastime for effeminate men and homosexuals, while Silverton earlier had also been described as a man "who had meant to live on proofreading and write an epic, and who now lived on his friends and had become critical of truffles" (45). Lily also implies Silverton's frequent reliance on his sisters for financial support (23); this dependence on women places Silverton beneath women in society, a striking commentary on men who follow their own poetic, more effeminate nature in lieu of the monetary, and materialistic, and therefore masculine, lives of men such as Rosedale or Trenor.

Selden connects to this perhaps homosexual, or at least misunderstood, character; yet, Silverton's effeminate reliance on others to support him and his apparent promiscuity remind Selden of the repercussions of not fitting the masculine ideal of the day. He even questions how Silverton and other disillusioned youth in society mistake their desires and beliefs for "illusions": "Why do we call all our generous ideas illusions, and the mean ones truths? Isn't it a sufficient condemnation of society to find one's self accepting such phraseology? I very nearly acquired the jargon at Silverton's age, and I know how names

can alter the colour of beliefs" (57). Here, Selden again recognizes how Silverton has fallen into the same trap he has. Silverton has engaged in multiple affairs, perhaps to assert his masculinity, and he has not achieved success because he has not totally fit the masculine ideal, just as Selden cannot find true success or happiness because he must entangle his own sexual "illusions" with "truths" in order to remain within high society.

Michael Davitt Bell, in *The Problem of American Realism*, posits the notion that one of the greatest problems for male writers during the later 1800s was to overcome the stereotype of artists not being "real men" (22). It is not coincidental that a man who does not fit the elite class's heterosexual ideal of the wealthy, masculine businessman evokes Selden's sympathy, as he apparently does not wish to see Silverton fall into the clutches of marriage and women. Eventually, Silverton will cause the financial ruin of his family, as "he has begun going about with all sorts of *queer* people," says Gerty Farish (206, italics added). The term "queer," though not as widely recognized derogatorily as in modern society, serves as a "fuller, though still highly equivocal, lexical [pointer] to a homosexual meaning" (Sedgwick 203) in that era. The two male characters who fail miserably at love and life are, indeed, the two male characters who most closely display homosexual tendencies or stereotypes of the time period.

Gay or bisexual men and women frequently, when confronted with the reality of their orientation, experiment with the opposite sex in order to test themselves to determine whether or not they could be happy living a "normal" or "socially acceptable" lifestyle to avoid the anguish of living a life on the socially-relegated fringes. Howard Chudacoff, in his examination of American bachelorhood, provides an example from Wharton's era of a bisexual New York writer and poet, Frederick Shelley Ryman, who

attempted to mask his sexuality by dating women and hiring prostitutes, a popular practice resulting from the widespread homosexual panic:

> Ryman lived a tortured existence, torn between social pressures--and, apparently, his own confused proclivities--for heterosexual relationships and marriage on the one hand and a latent and sometimes overt homosexuality or bisexuality on the other. Ryman was capable of intense love for both men and women, but he also was capable of inordinate hostility toward women. (235)

Eventually, Ryman began dabbling with prostitutes and, according to Michael Kimmel, he "seemed to be claiming his manhood as well as his masculinity. He also articulated such an assertion by adamantly stating his preference for bachelorhood" (Chudacoff 237). Though Wharton offers no evidence that Selden perused local brothels, he does engage in the affair with Bertha Dorset, though neither indicates much of an attachment to one another. Chudacoff's example could apply to Selden's own ambiguity and confusion throughout the entire novel over Lily and would explain his ultimate rejection of her. Wharton would likely have become privy to such stories considering her intense involvement in literary circles, many which featured homosexual men, beginning in the late 19th century (Holbrook 9). Whether or not she knew of Ryman's difficulties, Wharton obviously lived during a time of great confusion as homosexuals began attempting to escape the confines of the closet. Wharton herself would eventually fall in love with Morton Fullerton, a bisexual man who also held a strong romantic interest in Wharton's mentor, Henry James. Like Ryman, Selden pulls and pushes Lily continually, but he eventually rejects the only woman he could ever experience the slightest desire for, indicating his realization of his homosexual orientation.

Throughout their encounter on the hill in Book 1, Wharton attributes far more intense, romantic, and sexually-charged language to Lily than she does to Selden. While Lily, "though her attitude was as calm as his, was throbbing inwardly with a rush of

thoughts“ (52), Selden sits observing her with “lazy amusement” (54) and gazes at her with “latent sweetness” in his eyes (55), with “latent” implying something hidden or repressed. Furthermore, Wharton describes Lily’s emotions in far greater detail than she does Selden’s, also implying a great difference in romantic interest. When Selden begins to smoke a cigarette--which clearly becomes a phallic image as the scene progresses--Lily practically begs for a cigarette: “‘Oh, do give me one--I haven’t smoked for days!’” (55). Shortly, thereafter, Lily “gaz[es] absently through the blue *ring*s of her cigarette-smoke” (56, italics added), with “ring” being an antiquated anatomical allusion to the female anatomy. Once Selden lights a cigarette and offers it to Lily, the act stimulates Lily in a way that it does not Selden: “It seemed to him necessary, at that moment, to proclaim, by some *habitual gesture* of this sort, his recovered hold on the actual: he had an almost puerile wish to let his companion see that, their flight over, he had landed on his feet” (59, italics added).

While Selden does lose his composure somewhat, he appears to be less affected by their encounter than she does. Selden, in typical fashion, fluctuates between a desire to unite with Lily and the desire to pull away from her by not allowing her to see anything that would lead her to believe he loves her. Throughout the remainder of the scene, Lily remains discomfited: she accepts his cigarette with an “unsteady” hand; her “mouth tremble[s] into a smile” (59); and she speaks with an “odd thrill of gaiety” (60). Selden’s emotion during the erotic scene still does not imply any sort of sexual attraction: “Selden’s voice was under better control [than Lily’s]” (60). Therefore, at this point, Selden cannot express his emotions and follow his heart because he does not share Lily’s emotions and because of his own sexual confusion. Selden does admire everything about

Lily, even down to her clothes and her body, and holds a fondness for her above all other women, but he never clearly indicates the passion that women such as Lily and Bertha seek within him. With Bertha, he knew that a rather obvious liaison would mask his sexuality and that neither he nor she would become emotionally tied. In Lily's case, he could not pursue such a social affair because he does not want to hinder the friendship that he shared with her and because he knew that she, unlike him, would be hurt with the truth that he, ultimately, could not be with her romantically.

While turning from Lily's and society's expectations, Selden displays intriguing tastes and abilities outside of the social realm, as well. Selden noticeably engages in atypical behavior for the typical heterosexual man at the turn of the century, beginning with the demonstration of his domestic prowess when Lily visits him at The Benedick--perhaps not only a phallic allusion to the fact that bachelors inhabited the place, but also, according to this reading of the novel, to subtly emphasize Selden's interest in male genitalia. It is, however, the events that occur inside The Benedick that prove most interesting in regard to Selden's masculinity.

Upon their arrival at the apartment, Selden mentions that his manservant may have left out the tea accoutrements, but Selden, without hesitation, assumes the domestic role of serving the cake and pouring the tea with Lily only assisting. Furthermore, Wharton emphasizes this act of locating and preparing the cake, as she painstakingly--and unnecessarily--details how he looks for the cake, how he eventually locates the cake, and finally cuts the cake. In only half a page, Wharton refers to the cake four times, emphasizing this unusual concern of Selden's over the typically feminine domestic role of serving. Oddly, although Lily measures the tea into the teapot, Selden serves the tea,

cuts her a wedge of lemon, and slips it into her tea. Though not unusual for the bachelor of Wharton's day to sponsor gatherings and dinners for friends in "common rooms" shared between the tenants (Chudacoff 86), a typical, masculine bachelor would probably not assume or share the role of host(ess) in his own apartment as Selden does with Lily. In a study of gender roles within the domestic sphere conducted by Offrias and Tognoli in 1979, 74 years following the publication of *The House of Mirth*, results indicate that the woman *still* held the responsibilities of "daily and special cooking, bedmaking and sewing, *setting and clearing the table*, laundry, vacuuming" and numerous other traditionally feminine tasks (Tognoli 602). Gender roles evolved dramatically in that timespan, so Selden's involvement in domesticity would have surprised even those living much later in the century, not to mention those living in his own time period.

The typical heterosexual bachelor in the early 1900s would, according to Suzanne Rose, either hire a maid to assume such duties or allow the woman (if one is present) to serve refreshments and to perform the usual feminine domestic duties: "Since Selden and Lily are obviously very close, it would not seem particularly unusual that she would make herself at home boiling water and preparing tea – that would certainly be a way of demonstrating their intimacy" ("RE:"). Yet, Selden and Lily share this feminine role, indicating Selden's ease at moving within "feminine space," an area that the evolving American man, or even the bachelor, would likely not have entered so lightly and voluntarily as Selden. Sedgwick says, though, that, "in the increasingly stressed nineteenth-century bourgeois dichotomy between domestic female space and extra familial, political and economic male space, the bachelor is at least partly feminized by his attention to and interest in domestic concerns" (189-90). Important to note here is

that Sedgwick says that the bachelor would have been "*partly* familiar" with domestic concerns; however, Selden easily and unhesitatingly assumes the feminine role of hosting Lily. Selden admittedly fluctuates himself between the "working" man and the more relaxed "high class" man, but the novel does not give attention to his "other" life. While this may stem from a lack of importance within the plot, it may also indicate that Selden's comfort zone and primary role in life was as the effeminate man who elegantly serves tea and spends his time in the company of women. Sedgwick, after discussing the typical bachelor's acquaintance with domesticity, says that his "intimacy with club land and bohemia gives him a special passport to the world of men, as well" (190). Since Selden works and straddles the fence of social stratification, he would, of course, be expected to belong to a club. He does, in fact, belong to one, but this is only mentioned in passing. Had Wharton reduced Selden's role in the novel to that of a minor character, this inattention to his "other" would stem from the lack of importance to the plot; yet, Selden plays nearly as important of a role in the novel as Lily does. It stands to reason, therefore, that the more masculine "business" side of Selden does not figure into his true self, thus explaining the constant appearance and detail of Selden's appearances in the domestic sphere and in the company of women rather than his buddies from the club or from high society.

Selden's expertise as a server stands in stark contrast to Percy Gryce's response to taking tea aboard the train with Lily shortly after her visit at The Benedick. Gryce, portrayed as the more socially-acceptable heterosexual male, however dull with his Americana collection, great wealth, and beard, merely watches as Lily assumes the traditionally feminine role of serving the tea. His "masculine" appearance follows

contemporary trends, as "beards and moustaches experienced a cultural revival, as they had in the 1840s, as one of the easiest ways to sharpen the distinction between the sexes" (Kimmel 123). Unlike Selden, Gryce does not suggest taking tea; in fact, "he would never have dared to order it for himself, lest he should attract the notice of his fellow-passengers; but, secure in the shelter of her conspicuousness, he sipped the inky draught with a delicious sense of exhilaration" (18). This display clearly demonstrates the typical way that a man and woman would take tea together. Selden served both cake and tea, complete with lemon wedge, with great ease, whereas Gryce finds Lily's ability to serve tea fascinating: "It seemed wonderful to him that any one should perform with such careless ease the difficult task of making tea in public in a lurching train" (18). If Gryce found such an act so intriguing, one wonders how Selden's fine adroitness as a host would have amused--or shocked--Gryce. Gryce claims that the railway tea is delicious, yet Lily notes that Selden's brew tasted far better, an indication that Selden knows quite well the feminine arena of serving tea, even down to purchasing quality varieties. Therefore, Wharton's emphasis on Selden's movements during tea clearly set up the tea taken with Gryce, an emphasis that separates Selden from the typical bachelor of the day, who would be incapable and ignorant of the intricacies of such domestic rituals.

Wharton portrays Lawrence Selden as the closest man in the novel to being the "ideal male," even with his faults, and this becomes an interesting point, considering that he is the most feminine/feminized male in the entire novel; yet, Lily finds him more attractive than Simon Rosedale or Percy Gryce. Annette Larson Benert notes the importance of Selden's home in indicating his true character and Wharton's apparent belief that the ideal man results from a meshing of both masculinity and femininity to

form a more complete self:

> We might, of course, see an alternative [to typical male heterosexuality], placed near the novel's opening and closing, in Lawrence Selden's apartment, the most inviting interior in the novel, and the only one created by a man. The "slip of a hail [sic] hung with old prints" and a table heaped with "letters and notes," the "small library, dark but cheerful, with its walls of books, a pleasantly faded Turkey rug, a littered desk," and tea table, the breeze "bringing a fresh scent of mignonette and petunias from the flower-box on the balcony" of an autumn afternoon--all take on "a sweeter touch of intimacy" in "the shaded lamps and the warm hearth" of winter twilight. Yet it is entirely a masculine space; even the servant is male, and Lily knows she takes a "'risk'" even being there. (32)

While none of the household items reeks of femininity, little details about his home, such as the flowers and the "sweeter [. . .]intimacy," give his apartment more of a refined, feminine atmosphere. It is also interesting to note that Selden differs from the other typical heterosexual men, such as Percy Gryce, who merely collect books and Americana--he, instead, prefers to read his books.

While Selden's servant is also male, this would not necessarily indicate the masculinity of the place as Benert suggests--the char-woman's reaction to Lily as she descends the stairs leaves open the question of who frequents Selden's flat. Lily believes the inquiring look from the char-woman to be either that of a lowly woman who becomes "dazzled by such an unwonted apparition" (13) or rather that of a woman who has seen many other women like Lily emerge from these bachelors' quarters; yet, would a woman so accustomed to seeing such "apparitions" take such great notice? No, the woman would not have thought twice of Lily's appearance had she been accustomed to seeing women come and go from Selden's apartment--he does not appear to have any intimate friends other than Lily and Gerty, so this would explain why she may have been surprised to see a female visitor.

The char-woman also would not have been dazzled by a woman of Lily's social

standing emerging from the apartments. Though Gerty Farish comes from a lower class, the char-woman would have been well-accustomed to well-dressed, "quality" women, and the description and location of The Benedick indicates that people of better society live here: "[Lily] glanced with interest along the new brick and limestone house fronts, fantastically varied in obedience to the American craving for novelty, but fresh and inviting with their awnings and flower-boxes" (7). Wharton attributes new brick, a marble porch, and "pseudo-Georgian façade" (7) to The Benedick, all of which paint a nice picture of what Selden's living conditions must have been like. She also finds the interior attractive, not shabby or run down as an apartment building inhabited by the lower-class would be. Lily, dazzled herself only by those tasteful homes and items owned by the better quality items of the upper class, even gives Selden her stamp of approval by saying, "What a nice looking building!" (7). The Benedick, therefore, must not be an establishment that would be devoid of attractive, upper class women like Lily. Eventually, Lily will realize that the char-woman believes her to be the writer of Bertha's letters to Selden because she once saw Lily speak to Rosedale after leaving Selden's apartment; this would again indicate that Lily must be the only female ever noted to have visited Selden.

At a time when American men had begun to re-develop their image in response to their rapid feminization stemming from the New Woman movement, Selden would likely have followed suit had he been the typical heterosexual male struggling to maintain a masculine identity in the face of such scathing New York society. Women now invaded realms previously considered homosocial: "The first wave of the women's movement really picked up momentum after the Civil War with concurrent campaigns for entry into

the workplace, university, and voting booth" (Kimmel 86). Consequently, the American male now encountered new, feminine ideas on the job and found himself under more of a strain to find employment due to the increasing competitiveness of women. Rising numbers of female instructors in schools led American men to believe that these teachers "'warp[ed] the psyches of [. . .] boys and young men into femininity'" (Kimmel 121). The days of the frontier and patriarchy had come to an end, and men found themselves struggling to reassert the masculinity that they believed women had robbed from them.

Certainly, Selden accepts Bertha Dorset's attentions to deter the stigma of effeminacy, but the typical bachelors of the day would have, in the words of Michael Kimmel, "felt themselves on display at virtually all times; and that the intensity of the need for such display was increasing. To be considered a real man, one had better make sure to always be walking around and acting 'real masculine'" (100). In order to assert one's masculinity, a man must associate with other men to discuss their business lives, their clubs, and their sexual escapades. Yet, when attending social events at Bellomont and elsewhere, Selden can usually be found in the company of women--but not romantically or sexually, except in cases when Bertha accosts him for her own purposes. During an engagement at Bellomont, Lily looks for Selden in the library; she suspects he would go there to read rather than to flirt privately as many other men do. Again, Wharton implies a difference between Selden and the other men in the novel. Once Lily finds him, he sits talking with Bertha but with a book on his knee, indicating that he had, in fact, gone to the library originally to read instead of to flirt with Bertha. When Selden engages in conversation, he typically is found speaking to women, and he goes to his cousin Gerty Farish's for dinner upon *his* request for one of the only social activities in

which he is mentioned to have engaged outside of his and Lily's mutual social circle.

Selden also declines social invitations to spend time in the company of heterosexual men, as when he does not accept Gus Trenor's invitation to join him for dinner at their club. Though Selden is seen attending a club, he only checks his mail, declines a social invitation, and hurriedly leaves; he appears mostly without other bachelor friends. His club membership, like his relationship with Bertha, could be more to fit the heterosexual expectations for masculinity and bachelorhood--in order to remain camouflaged--than to pursue his own interests with heterosexual men like Trenor.

The James in Wharton

Sedgwick posits that James's John Marcher of "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903) could not fully reciprocate the love of May Bartram because of his homosexuality. Perhaps not coincidentally, Edith Wharton began writing *The House of Mirth* the year James's short story came out but did not fully engage in the writing of her book until approximately a year later (Benstock 144). Sedgwick's analysis of Marcher overlaps eerily with the possibility of homosexual panic occurring within Selden, demonstrating both that James may have influenced Wharton's novel and that queer theory can explain Selden's difficulties, especially in the final scene of the novel.

Lily Bart certainly desires Lawrence Selden both for friendship and a relationship, but Selden's desires, as previously established, remain far more ambiguous. Yet, the frequent heterosexual readings of *The House of Mirth* force critics to see only that Selden *should* have loved Lily, but for some unknown reason could not. These heterosexual readings are often inconclusive, offering more questions than answers as to why Selden

never spoke "the word which made all clear" before she died. This epiphany bears a striking resemblance to James's text, and Sedgwick notes that Marcher realizes that he could have solved her problem and saved her by simply loving her as she had desired:

> It is only the last scene of the story--Marcher's last visit to May Bartram's grave--that conceals or denies the humility, the incompleteness of the story's presentation of her subjectivity. This is the scene in which Marcher's sudden realization that *she* has felt and expressed desire for *him* is, as it seems, answered in an intensely symmetrical, 'conclusive' rhetorical clinch by the narrative/authorial prescription: "The escape would have been to love her; then, *then* he would have lived." (199)

Selden realizes the connection forged between Lily and himself; yet, he, like Marcher, fails to ascertain the damage inflicted upon the other party due to his indecision and failure to reciprocate that love. Both men feel a sense of guilt for dragging the women (Lily and May) in their lives down with them; yet, both of them withhold something at the end: Marcher carries a burdensome secret, and Selden still cannot audibly speak the truth--whatever that may be--to Lily, even upon her death, except in the silence that passes between them.

This silence, though an absence of speech, speaks louder than anything else in either text in regard to masculinity. At a time when straight men searched for any possible means of expressing heterosexuality, which also indicated their "masculinity," Selden and Marcher go in the opposite direction, via a *lack* of expression. After accurately positing that "the lack in [many books] of an embodied male-homosexual thematic, however inevitable, has had a dissolute effect on the structure and texture of [the] argument" that homosexual themes do, in fact, exist within those texts, Sedgwick says:

> In "The Beast in the Jungle," written at the threshold of the new century, the possibility of an embodied male-homosexual thematic has, I would like to argue, a precisely liminal presence. It is present as a--as a very particular, historicized-

-thematics of absence, and specifically of the absence of speech. (201)

This absence--of heterosexuality and of the words to explain his sexuality to Lily--explains "the conditions of life [that] had conspired to keep them apart" (Wharton 255). Selden does not want to tell Lily the truth, but he also likely does not know the precise words or conditions to discuss with her, how to accurately explain the "beast" that he and Marcher fight. From silence Selden also derives "courage not to accuse himself for having failed to reach the height of his opportunity" (255). Lily helped him by remaining silent so that Selden would not blame himself for having failed her without him realizing how she had helped him by not judging or turning away from him for whatever unsaid situation retained him from loving her fully and romantically.

Stereotyping the Artist

While Selden passes for straight, Claud Walsingham Popple, an artist, does not as easily do so in *The Custom of the Country*. Though a minor character, Popple's characterization demonstrates Wharton's acknowledgment of stereotyping within New York--and American--society of the male artist as an effeminate homosexual. By portraying Popple as unmarried and effeminate, however, Wharton perpetuates the stereotypes surrounding artists and homosexuals.

Popple's profession alone does not stereotypically indicate him as a homosexual, however. At first mention of his name in conversation between Mrs. Spragg, Mrs. Heeny, and Undine, Mrs. Heeny indicates that she "manicured him for his first society portrait--a full-length of Mrs. Harmon B. Driscoll" (23). Not only is he overly concerned with his own appearance to the point of having his nails done professionally, but he also is noted as paying extreme detail to feminine appearances while no connection with

masculine appearances receives mention. Though any successful portrait artist must pay such attention to detail, this mention of his specialization in femininity appears to coincide with his other feminine characteristics. He speaks in gushing excess even with other men and exclaims to Undine that he has been forced to restrain his desires and passions: "'Passion,' the artist implied, would have been the dominant note of his life, had it not been held in check by a sentiment of exalted chivalry, and by the sense that a nature of such emotional intensity as his must always be 'ridden on the curb'" (99). In other words, Popple has repressed his sexuality in order to maintain his status because his "nature" must be "ridden" on the curb--perhaps an erotic allusion to sex that must remain hidden from view.

Most telling of Popple's effeminacy is the description Wharton provides of both Popple and his home during the unveiling of Undine's portrait. This scene hearkens back to *The House of Mirth* in which Selden serves tea and cake to Lily in his apartment and begins with the following passage: "It was one of the distinctions of Mr. Claud Walsingham Popple that his studio was never too much encumbered with the attributes of his art to permit the installing, in one of its cushioned corners, of an elaborately furnished tea-table flanked by the most varied seductions in sandwiches and pastry" (172). Like Selden, Popple obviously knows well the domestic art of serving and hosting; while Selden mentions a man-servant, no maid or servant ever receives mention with Popple. He is described here as being very elegant, both in art and in life, and is referred to by a patron as "the only man who could 'do pearls'" (172). Again, he has been distinguished from other men in effeminate ways; how unusual for a man to pay such attention to feminine jewelry and to "[keep] his studio tidy enough for a lady to sit to him in a new

dress" (172).

Popple's domestic prowess and physical appearance also render his sexuality ambiguous, especially in light of masculine expectations of the time period. Wharton describes Popple's movement about the teacups as he assumes the feminine role of making and serving tea to his guests:

> The artist himself, becomingly clad in mouse-colored velveteen, had just turned away from the picture to hover above the teacups; but his place had been taken by the considerably broader bulk of Mr. Peter Van Degen, who, tightly moulded into a coat of the latest cut, stood before the portrait in the attitude of a first arrival. (173)

Significantly, Peter van Degen's stature contrasts greatly with the smaller Popple. Bulk and muscles indicate "real men," so it would appear here again that Popple pales in comparison to the obviously heterosexual Van Degen. At the time, health reformers such as Bernarr Macfadden promoted true masculinity as being indicated by muscles and regular workout routines--not smaller, less defined men such as Popple. The figure of a man, an artist at that, who "hovers above teacups" and "do[es] pearls" like no other man does not resonate with the portrait of masculinity and heterosexuality of Wharton's era.

Bernarr Macfadden reached the height of his publishing career with *Physical Culture* during Wharton's lifetime and "was a flamboyant personality, millionaire publisher, and life-long advocate of physical fitness, natural food, outdoor exercise, and the natural treatment of disease" (Bennett 1). Mark Whalan says that the physical culture movement's popularity grew exponentially by

> publishing techniques for developing muscular physiques in magazines such as Macfadden's *Physical Culture*, which he began publishing in 1899. [It] prescribed health in terms of a disciplined attitude to diet, exercise, sex, work and leisure, and enjoyed a circulation of 550,000 just over a year after it was first published. (3)

With such a broad readership throughout the country, Wharton undoubtedly became

aware of such popular thought, regardless of whether or not she read Macfadden specifically, and she would have known that Popple did not match the expectations of masculinity, regardless of social class. "'In 1904, [Macfadden] denounced 'the shoals of painted, perfumed, Kohl-eyed, lisping, mincing youths [. . .] ogling every man that passes and--it is pleasant to relate--occasionally getting a sound thrashing or an emphatic kicking" (Rotundo 100). *Physical Culture,* according to Whalan, had now shifted the focus within masculinity onto the body rather than the previous focus on the building of character, and this led American men to develop materialist attitudes toward themselves and others (600). Popple defies this form of masculinity more than Selden, as Selden continues to hold a "normal" job and does not display as many feminine mannerisms or physical characteristics.

Rotundo describes the stereotypical homosexual by saying that "gay men--called 'fairies' or 'queers' at [the turn of the century]--'act effeminately; most of them are painted and powdered . . . [and] ape the female character,' noted one police investigator in 1899" (99). Furthermore, "psychiatrists routinely diagnosed men as homosexual if they exhibited traits that were seen as less than manly--an abnormal 'dread of dust and dirt,' for example, or a finicky attention to clothing and personal appearance" (99). Popple's attributes resemble all of these characteristics, though he never appears to flamboyantly "ape the female character." Mrs. Heeny, a "society" manicurist and masseuse, boasts that she manicured Popple to prepare him for his first "society" portrait. Few men, even in modern society, express such meticulousness over their appearances, and Popple clearly wants his nails done simply for aesthetic reasons and not for practicality: a manicure would not physically aid him in painting Mrs. Harmon B.

Driscoll's portrait. While Mrs. Heeny discusses Popple with Undine, she markedly notes that Popple "ain't in the same class with [Marvell]!" (23) and that she "know[s] everybody. If they don't know ME they ain't in it, and Claud Walsingham Popple's in it. But he ain't nearly AS in it [. . .] as Ralph Marvell" (23). Twice within a matter of paragraphs, Mrs. Heeny emphasizes that Popple's status falls beneath Ralph Marvell's; yet, she also claims that they both reside in the same elite, social class. Analyzing these comments with an eye to gender implications, one could conclude that Mrs. Heeny may imply a difference in masculinity since the effeminized man in society (Ralph) would draw less criticism than the homosexual (Popple). Popple also notices intricacies of feminine beauty and compliments women in a manner that Wharton calls "'artistic'" (37); the placing of quotes signifies the word as holding more than just the surface meaning. It appears that, perhaps, his friends excuse his preoccupation with beauty and femininity on his artistic nature, but the underlying reason may be his own effeminacy and homosexuality.

In another ambiguous reference to Popple's effeminacy, Mrs. Fairford says, "'That delightful Popple--he paints so exactly as he talks!' [. . .] 'All his portraits seem to proclaim what a gentleman he is, and how he fascinates women!'" (47). Her statement both alludes to, as Fairford says, Popple's chivalry, but it also alludes to the effeminacy of perhaps his voice, manner of speaking, or his conversation topics. Popple paints women, and Fairford says he paints as he talks. Her statement also indicates an important point about women's views on Popple: he fascinates them. Despite this tendency to attract women, Popple never expresses interest in dating a woman, despite his rather important role and the emphasis on "society" marriages. This effeminacy of character

and disinterest in heterosexual romance distinguishes Popple from the other men in the novel.

Popple can, however, remain in society because "his reputation had been permanently established by the verdict of a wealthy patron" (172). His form, however pales in comparison to the masculine, "broader bulk of Mr. Peter Van Degen" (173); and he successfully holds a stereotypically homosexual occupation among high society benefits the socially elite. He paints their portraits beautifully, and that provides enough to provisionally include a man whom members of society frequently laugh at behind his back, as when Mrs. Fairford jokes about Popple being "the only man who has ever told me he was a gentleman--and Mr. Popple never fails to mention it" (47). Undine notes then that "her companions were making sport of the painter" (47), and Fairford's comment implies that Popple may feel the need to assert himself as a man excessively more than other men around.

Both Lawrence Selden and Claud Walsingham Popple present interesting cases for the literary critic. Each, in his own right, possesses great strength to attempt to live in a society in flux in regard to the merging--or, in ways, *diverging*--binaries of the masculine and the feminine. Yet, if both characters are read as homosexual, Selden's sexuality leads to the symbolic demise of the heterosexual woman, Lily Bart, while Popple merely cements in readers' minds the portrait of the artist as "fairy" or "queen," the effeminate laughingstock among his "friends" who assumes feminine characteristics and must rely on others to stay afloat as an "honorary" member of society. No matter Wharton's intentions with her effeminate, possibly homosexual characters, one wonders whether or not she intended to further the cause for the acceptance of homosexuality or

rather to negate it.

Chapter 2: Who's Who?: Confusion over Masculine Roles in Marriage at the Turn of the Century

Domestic married life throughout the centuries relegated the woman of the early to mid-nineteenth century to caring for the children, cleaning the house, and serving her husband. She repressed her sexuality and fell into subservience under a patriarchal society that believed her sexuality uncontrollable, incomprehensible, and in need of containment. Wharton witnessed these oppressive gender roles within the confines of marriage, specifically within the home. Toward the latter part of the century, however, the New Woman emerged and pushed for independence in marriage (and, for many, from men entirely), equality in the workplace, and a more business-like approach to living and to marriage. Through characters such as Alice Waythorn and Undine Spragg, Wharton addresses the changes that many American women encountered with their roles in the marriage and divorce markets. Each woman goes through a succession of suitors and husbands in order to climb socially. As a result of the women's increasing independence, Wharton's male characters grow increasingly feminized within the marital sphere: they must accept their wives' multiple relationships, care for their families in the domestic realm, and, at times, become objectified the way that they had persistently viewed woman as art objects to satisfy their own desires and pleasures. These switched gender roles led both society and the men themselves to question their masculinity and their sexuality.

In this chapter, I will focus on two such male characters that are feminized through marriage: Waythorn (whose first name Wharton does not mention) of "The Other Two" and Ralph Marvell of *The Custom of the Country*. For Waythorn of "The Other Two" (1904), marrying a two-time divorcée proves difficult when his wife's first two

husbands resurface after his marriage. Forecasting one of her darkest critiques of marriage, *The Custom of the Country*, "The Other Two" poignantly signifies the difficult consequences of the growing acceptance of the divorce market. While Alice survives social scrutiny since "a New York divorce is in itself a virtue" (164), she eventually causes emotional difficulty for Waythorn because of her past relationships. Still, Waythorn's situation and eventual resolution only scratch the surface of a growing problem in American society because of the increasing availability and social acceptance of divorce and the business-like tone applied to marriage. Alice Waythorn strategically marries husband after husband to capitalize upon the growing acceptance of divorce, but she does not exhibit the cold, deceptive, aggressive attitudes toward men and marriage that Undine Spragg will employ in *The Custom of the Country*. This chapter will examine the expectations for the masculine role and image within marriage by connecting "The Other Two" to *The Custom of the Country*.

A Husband's Search for Masculine Identity in "The Other Two"

Wharton's portrayal of Alice Waythorn's husbands reflects society's standards for male body image in early 20th century America, and these expectations play a role in determining the social hierarchy of Mrs. Waythorn's husbands. Her first husband, Haskett, wears shabby clothes and speaks quietly; her second husband, Varick, is physically attractive and refined; and Waythorn, her third husband, receives no physical attributes in the story except for his own self-critiquing comment that he "was conscious of cutting a much less impressive figure than [Varick]" (172). Both Haskett and Varick have struggled with money, but Varick looks and acts much more masculine, and Alice

appears to feel far more comfortable continuing her association with him than with Haskett. Waythorn also respects Varick more and admires his demeanor and masculinity, but he scorns Haskett for his attire and weaker appearance. Once Waythorn meets Haskett and observes his weaker physical appearance, Waythorn appears to consider him less of a threat to his own masculine identity and to his marriage.

Haskett does not look the part of the celebrated, physically strong man who displays health reformer Bernarr Macfadden and *Physical Culture*'s prescribed strength, brawn, and boldness. Macfadden says in *Vitality Supreme* that "A vital man is at all times thoroughly alive [. . . .] A vital man is naturally enthusiastic. He can hardly avoid being ambitious. And consequently success, with all its splendid rewards, comes to such a man in abundance. Life to such a man should be resplendent with worthy achievements." According to him, the lively, physically fit man will reap success in life simply because of his body. Haskett, however, appears rather as a mousy, timid man who attracts great disdain from the "superior" Waythorn:

> In the library [Waythorn] found a small effaced-looking man with a thinnish gray beard sitting on the edge of the chair. The stranger might have been a piano-tuner, or one of those mysteriously efficient persons who are summoned in emergencies to adjust some detail of the domestic machinery. He blinked at Waythorn through a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. (173)

Later, while speaking with Waythorn, "there was nothing aggressive in [Haskett's] manner, but he had the solemnity of a timid man resolved on a decisive measure" (177).

These descriptions of Haskett do not appear too far from Michael Kimmel's definition of the so-called "sissy" at the turn of the century, although Haskett lacks the extreme effeminacy of that figure. Kimmel says:

> The sissy was outwardly feminine in demeanor, comportment, and affect. If manhood is defined by courage, generosity, modesty, dignity, wrote Rafford Pyke in 1902 in his diatribe against sissies in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, then the

> sissy was 'flabby, feeble, mawkish figure, smooth faced, a little vacuous in the expression of the countenance, with light hair and rather pale eyes a little wide apart; a voice not necessarily weak, but lacking timbre, resonance, carrying power.' (122)

Haskett's meekness and worn attire undermine his masculinity. Haskett is also referred to again as a "little man" (177), who, when presenting his argument that the Waythorns should fire his daughter Lily's governess, speaks only with "*mild* persistency" (176, italics added). In fact, late nineteenth century critics of masculinity held physical strength and appearance as the equivalent of strength in character. Rotundo quotes one man of the time period as saying that "'flabby muscles are no less flabby than [a man's] character'" (223). Rotundo also says that "middle-class culture had identified 'passion' as a fundamental quality of the male sex. Lust, greed, selfishness, ambition, and physical assertiveness were all seen as distinctively male traits'" (227). Before meeting Haskett, Waythorn assumes the man a "brute" (173) because he expected a middle-class, working man to possess rather hard-edged, hyper-masculine characteristics so promoted among the working class. He also chooses to imagine Haskett negatively in order to portray Alice as the victim and, therefore, to justify her reasons for divorcing him. This indicates that Haskett does not fulfill the expectations of his gender as prescribed by his class. Haskett asserts himself only mildly in their conversations, while he also fails to exhibit any of the other qualities Kimmel mentions believed to constitute a real man: "[Haskett] had a *resigned* way of speaking, as though life had worn down his natural powers of resistance" (173, italics added). This description portrays Haskett as effeminate by early 20th century standards because of his lack of assertion in both his manner of speaking and what he actually says

(that he can wait to see his daughter Lily). Waythorn initially remains guarded against his wife's continued interactions with such a man when he prematurely pictures him as a "brute," yet, after meeting Haskett and observing his appearance and mannerisms, he no longer cares that his wife's ex-husband continues to visit their home, as such a "weak, effeminate" man could no longer pose a threat to his marriage or masculinity.

Waythorn also does not respect Haskett as a "real" man due to his financial status, demonstrating how capitalism and financial status became so important among men in 18th and early 19th century America[1]. It is important to note when Waythorn runs into Haskett for the first time that Haskett's hat and umbrella are described as "shabby" (173); furthermore, "it was grotesquely uppermost in Waythorn's mind that Haskett had worn a made-up tie attached with an elastic. Why should that ridiculous detail symbolize the man? Waythorn was exasperated by his own paltriness, but the fact of the tie expanded, [. . .] became as it were the key to Alice's past" (174-5). The passage indicates how men not only attempted to create social hierarchies based on sexuality, but they also judged each other for the financial status expressed through their material possessions. Men, especially those of the middle class, could be considered effeminate or homosexual without professional success and wealth; therefore, Waythorn views Haskett as a form of the "sissy" of the time period. The passage gives evidence that Waythorn himself realizes that material possessions should not factor into his opinion of what sort of man Haskett is, but he clearly cannot shake this overriding, typically American tendency to

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[1] David Leverenz traces the three ideologies of manhood (patrician, artisan, and entrepreneurial) that developed in the 19th century in *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (1990). By analyzing works such as Frederick Douglass's autobiography and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," Leverenz ties together gender and class in the American Renaissance, the period preceding the Realistic period in which Wharton wrote.

measure a man's worth and masculinity on financial status.

At the time Wharton published "The Other Two," Waythorn would likely have been struggling to ascertain his own identity as both a man, a husband, and a father, and he measures himself against Mrs. Waythorn's other husbands to develop such an identity. Before his initial encounter with Haskett, Waythorn sees the second husband, Varick, much to his chagrin. While Waythorn serves as a partner in a local business, Varick appears to possess the ability to take a more leisurely approach to life; Waythorn "wondered vaguely since when Varick had been dealing in 'important things [in the business world].' Hitherto he had dabbled only in the shallow pools of speculation, with which Waythorn's office did not usually concern itself" (168). Here, Waythorn places himself above Varick by indicating the lack of importance surrounding Varick's business associations, yet he later observes his predecessor enviously: "Varick was said to be fond of good living, and as Waythorn sat dispatching his hurried luncheon he looked half-enviously at the other's leisurely degustation of his meal" (169). This image of a man who enjoys good living and obviously has the financial means to do so, considering that Varick and his social/financial status had once presented Mrs. Waythorn with a "passport to the set whose recognition she coveted" (164), provides Waythorn later with a pattern to follow because Varick's lifestyle had obviously once pleased his wife more and because it fits the American ideal for masculinity.

When contemplating her marriages, Waythorn does not consider that Alice may have loved or at least have been attracted to Haskett. He rather grows puzzled because she married someone so financially and socially insecure,

> [realizing] suddenly that he knew very little of Haskett's past or present situation; but from the man's appearance and manner of speech he could

> reconstruct with curious precision the surroundings of Alice's first marriage. And it startled him to think that she had, in the background of her life, a phase of existence so different from anything with which he had connected her. Varick, whatever his faults, was a gentleman, in the conventional, traditional sense of the term: the sense which at that moment seemed, oddly enough, to have most meaning to Waythorn. He and Varick had the same social habits, spoke the same language, understood the same allusions. (174)

Waythorn concludes his analysis of her marriages by marveling at how radically different and dissatisfying Mrs. Waythorn's life must have been when she had been married to someone so impoverished as Haskett. Instead of aligning himself with Haskett, a poor man who sacrifices for the sake of his daughter, Waythorn rather finds himself more like Varick, who appears far more concerned with business and leisurely living.

Wharton attributes differing personalities and physical features to each husband, and these characteristics relate directly to class issues. Haskett lived as a middle-class man who needed money, an education, a wife, physical strength, beauty, and an acceptable job in order for his peers to consider him a viable, successful human being who earns the title of "man." He fails to sustain himself as husband material for Alice because his image does not at all fit that of the middle class, and his demeanor and physical characteristics likely did not present a promising portrait to Alice of a man with great potential for upward social mobility. Therefore, Alice leaves him in order to find another man with more promise. Though the upper class did not view masculinity as harshly, Haskett's effeminacy and financial instability still does not present an ideal portrait of masculinity.

Varick fails in his marriage to Alice for different reasons than Haskett: he married Alice at the wrong time, despite his reasonably acceptable social position, and failed to maintain affluence to retain his wife's respectability among her social peers. Wharton also describes the marriage as "brief" and "stormy" (164) but does not provide details to

explain why their marriage became "stormy." She does say, though, that Varick "had his champions" as much as Alice had hers, so one could surmise that Lily left him not because he had fallen into social disfavor among their set. Despite comments about Varick's instability in finances and evidently suspect business skills--Waythorn snidely says that he "dabbles in the pools of speculation" (168)--Varick does, however, present an ideal portrait of masculinity for the upper class, to which he belonged when they met. Wharton implies that Alice married him primarily because of his social class--she does not mention any personality traits or even physical characteristics that attracted her specifically, however, which is surprising considering the emphasis on male physical beauty.

Later in the story, Wharton does describe Varick's physical appearance as far more aesthetically pleasing than Haskett's, saying that his face is "handsome" and "overblown" (167) and that he is "easy without being undignified" (172). Wharton uses the adjective *easy* in connection with Varick twice, and Waythorn realizes that Alice has become "'as *easy* as an old shoe'" (179, italics added). For the social climbing Alice, Varick presents the stronger portrait of masculinity, and Wharton's emphasis of the word *easy* for them both further implies their connection. Though today *easy* might bear sexual connotations, the word would perhaps indicate something else. Within the context of its usage, the word may refer to their ability to move from one relationship to the next without emotional ties or nearly as much thought as Waythorn puts into his own concern over her past.

After their divorce, however, Varick becomes financially unstable like Haskett, but Varick remains far less scrutinized and scorned than Haskett by Waythorn, Alice, and

the upper class simply because of the class difference and because of physical attractiveness. This offers a foreshadowing of the negative tone surrounding Waythorn's masculinity and his potential as a husband for Alice.

Waythorn, at the telling of the story, has only returned from his honeymoon with Alice, so the reader never knows if he succeeds in his marriage or not. One can only surmise the direction in which it goes according to Alice's history and Waythorn's anxieties. Haskett had presented her with a less-than-optimal marriage because she, at that time, resided within that middle class. Waythorn, though possessing a "gray" temperament (164) and self-described as "womanish" in his sensibility, succeeds as a husband, at least for the moment, because he can give Alice money and promises more stability as a businessman than Varick, who earns much of his funding through rather vague "important things" (168) rather than through solid business such as Waythorn's position as a stockbroker in a partnership. Alice never indicates whether or not she cares how her money comes to her, but her social milieu in high society would likely not have respected Varick as much once his finances failed and he began dabbling in those "important things" that received Waythorn's scorn. Alice's marriage to Waythorn now demonstrates the upper class's heightened focus on the importance of money and business in marriage.

Despite his "triumph" over his wife's ex-husbands, Waythorn questions his masculine identity because of his wife's inability to distinguish between the various identities of her husbands and her willingness to accept all three men in her life despite the "weaknesses" that led to her former decisions to divorce Haskett and Varick. Alice's ability and willingness to quickly forget her husband's anxiety over Haskett's presence

indicates her calm, cool attitude toward men, the marriage market, and the necessary, however harsh or difficult, steps taken to rise socially. Debra Ann MacComb says that,

> like a snake seasonally renewing itself by shedding its skin, Alice--in discarding her husbands--jettisons every trace of the past she has shared with them. Her memory of those men as separate personalities has become so indistinct that she sometimes confuses or conflates them, as when she pours a measure of brandy into the coffee of a surprised Waythorn, who has just that afternoon observed Varick [taking brandy with his coffee]. (785)

This forgetfulness, as MacComb states, shows the rather mechanical, instead of emotional, attitude that Alice takes to her new marriage with Waythorn. It also reminds Waythorn that his masculinity and personality *blend* with those of her former husbands and that he has either not asserted his own distinguishing characteristics or that his wife simply has not invested enough thought or emotion into her relationships to distinguish present from the past. Consequently, he must decide whether or not to judge Alice for how she has handled her marriages: "He even began to reckon up the advantages which accrued from [the presence of Alice's ex-husbands into his life], to ask himself if it were not better to own a third of a wife who knew how to make a man happy than a whole one who had lacked opportunity to acquire the art. For it *was* an art; and made up, like all others, of concessions, eliminations and embellishments" (181). Waythorn has established, in this statement alone, that: 1. He still believes himself Alice's "owner" in the traditional patriarchal form of male dominance within marriage and speaks of their union in terms of business and property rather than love; 2. The divorce market could aid women in being wives who provide comfort for their husbands by allowing them to practice for "real" marriages such as his own; 3. A woman can lie, forget, discard, manipulate, and perform her "art" in order to succeed as a wife. After making this concession of his own, he then continues to concede to Alice's "art" in order to retain his

masculinity and feeling of ownership.

As Waythorn and Varick work together in business, Waythorn increasingly feels inferior, saying that Varick "bore himself admirably. He was easy without being undignified, and Waythorn was conscious of cutting a much less impressive figure. Varick had no head for business, and the talk prolonged itself for nearly and hour while Waythorn set forth with scrupulous precision the details of the proposed transaction" (172). Varick certainly remains inferior to Waythorn in regard to business savvy and knowledge, yet Waythorn feels inferior to him even in his own office because of Varick's apparent ease, attractiveness, and, perhaps, the suddenly increased wealth of his wife's ex-husband. He notes that his wife's marriage with Varick dissolved due to insufficient funding, so now he likely worries, though he does not specifically say so, that his masculinity has fallen further below Varick's because of this shift in financial status. Waythorn obviously admires Varick now more than ever over Haskett, but he also begins to appreciate the latter's fatherly devotion that, in Wharton's era, would have led to questions in society of effeminacy and homosexuality.

As part of the New Woman movement, traditional gender roles had begun to fade, but one traditionally feminine duty still belonged solely to the woman: motherhood. Throughout "The Other Two," however, Haskett appears very concerned about his daughter's health and appears more motherly than the actual mother. Once the father learns of his daughter Lily's illness, he wants to come visit her at her mother's home, but Alice Waythorn does not appear nearly as concerned about the seriousness of the typhoid fever that her daughter has contracted. When Alice and Waythorn return home from their honeymoon to care for Lily, she does not discuss the illness with her husband, nor does

she appear concerned upon descending from her daughter's bedroom; the impending situation between Waythorn and her ex-husband consume her thoughts instead. Considering the fact that typhoid had ravaged America and that she suffered immensely from typhoid once herself, Wharton undoubtedly offers a specific commentary here on Alice Waythorn as a mother. "When Alice finally enters the scene," says Gerard M. Sweeney, her chief concern is that "'something tiresome has happened': namely the sick child's father wants to visit his daughter. It is this event that produces the story's first miniature crisis and that causes the first marital discord. [. . .] From this point on in the story [after the crisis is resolved], Lily is of little concern to her mother" (5). This point, however, remains open to debate as Wharton gives little insight into or evidence to prove what Alice may or may not think. Once Haskett begins his frequent visits, however, he assumes the role of the worried, sacrificing mother instead of the typically masculine role that left fathers removed from the processes of child-rearing, especially with girls.

From the beginning, gender roles create confusion between Alice and Waythorn and exemplify the emerging independence of thought and actions among women of the early 20th century from traditional gender roles in marriage. Alice, though not a working wife, does not consult her husband as she makes decisions regarding "visitation rights" for Haskett. Waythorn claims that his wife must be a beacon of calm in times of illness because "no woman ever wasted less tissue in unproductive worry" (163), and the only comment she ever makes throughout the entire story about her ill daughter is "I've just been in, and she's still sleeping" (165). She curiously suggests that, if Lily's condition had been more favorable, she would have sent Lily elsewhere to recover in order to avoid the uncomfortable situation arising from Haskett's request. The typical, traditional

mother would not send her daughter away unless absolutely necessary, and it was commonly believed that a young girl's place was always with her mother far more so than with her father. Once they've briefly discussed Haskett's visit, Alice's eyes "were quite clear and untroubled; [Waythorn] saw that she had obeyed his injunction and forgotten [the situation]" (167). The next day, when Waythorn comes home, he asks the nurse about Lily rather than asking his wife--implying the nurse would know more than her own mother--and he and Alice speak only of Haskett.

Haskett, when first speaking with Waythorn, immediately shows the deep worry over his daughter that does not fully surface from the female parent with which the child lives. He says to Waythorn, "It's been an anxious time for me" (173). He then later expresses great distress over the French governess in a display of parental love that displays his ability to watch his daughter carefully and note changes in her, but he does so again in an unassertive, feminine, almost emotional way:

> "I don't like the woman," Haskett was repeating with mild persistency. "She ain't straight, Mr. Waythorn--she'll teach the child to be underhand. I've noticed a change in Lily--she's too anxious to please--and she don't always tell the truth. She used to be the straightest child, Mr. Waythorn--" He broke off, his voice a little thick. "Not but what I want her to have a stylish education" (176).

The emotion implied by the thickness arising in his voice does not suggest a masculine, assertive nature expected of a traditional father, and his mildness also lacks the assertion expected from a masculine man.

Though perhaps not unusual for a husband to take an interest in his daughter's education for social purposes, Haskett's overt interest in his daughter's rearing and education does not resonate with acceptable masculine parental involvement in the 19th century, and it further conflicts with the early 20th century masculine ideal. Not only has Haskett handled his parental role in a non-assertive manner, he has also demonstrated that

he values family more than he does those aforementioned traits that were now viewed as "distinctively masculine." Prior to Lily's illness, Haskett had forsaken his share in a successful business in order to move nearer his daughter so that he could continue to be a presence and influence in her life.

In a study of the evolution of gender roles in parenting, Maxine Atkinson and Steven Blackwelder find that the husband's role has evolved from provider to nurturer, a switch from the role taken on by Haskett with his daughter. He provides nothing for Lily but rather does his best to care for her, love her, and provide her with the emotional and mental support that her mother does not appear to provide. At the turn of the century, "fathers were expected to provide for their children and perhaps to bridge the gap between the home and larger society," while "fathers are now expected to participate in their children's lives by providing day-to-day care, both physical and emotional" (Atkinson and Blackwelder 976). Instead of seeing Haskett as provider and worker, the reader sees Haskett in the role of mother to Lily, at least in terms of early twentieth century gender roles. Waythorn's and Varick's roles in business and at the workplace receive quite a bit of mention, and this casts them in a masculine light; yet, Haskett, though surely employed, does not appear in his workplace, and Wharton never even clarifies what sort of work he is involved in. When Waythorn sees Varick, they talk a great deal of their work, but the interactions with Haskett lead only to discussions of his role as mother-figure to Lily.

Because of the rising concern in America over homosexuality and effeminacy in males, it makes sense that society would not support too much masculine involvement with the raising of a young girl just as men were seeking "to rescue their sons from the

feminizing clutches of mothers and teachers and create new ways to 'manufacture manhood'" (Kimmel 157). According to Kimmel, "the three principal institutions that dominate early childhood socialization--family, religion, and education--were completely staffed and run by women" (158). If woman's dominance in the educational field led to this instillation of effeminacy within boys as society predicted, the Waythorns perhaps grow anxious at seeing a slight threat to their daughter's femininity from this unusually persistent male presence in their home. Alice clearly believes that the father, perhaps because of the divorce, should retain no right to influence his child's life, that is unless he can aid her monetarily, which she implies by saying that "it's not as if he could ever be a help to Lily" (178). Alice also indicates her distaste for Haskett's parental assertions by saying that "it is very ungentlemanly of him" (178) to interfere in Lily's education and childhood by requesting the dismissal of the supposedly corrupting governess. Waythorn also asks, "What authority has [Haskett] over [Lily]?" (178). These comments, though said in anger and confusion about Haskett's concern, may also imply society did not expect such outpourings of concern and emotion from men, nonetheless a father. Haskett has usurped, in their eyes, the feminine sphere of parenthood.

Waythorn and Alice overlook their anxieties, however, and accept the confusion that her past has elicited. They continue to communicate with both husbands and even welcome them into their home. In the end, the three husbands and Alice Waythorn take tea together, and the story ends with Waythorn emitting a laugh upon realizing that Alice's past will forever shape the future of their marriage. Alice, though not entering the workplace or displaying masculine tendencies, demonstrates the shifting power in marital roles. Haskett and Varick's contrasting personalities, physical appearances, and

actions indicate the marital failure of both effeminate men and men who struggle financially (Varick did not have as much money during his marriage to Alice). "The Other Two" epitomizes the blending of masculinity and femininity, the confusion of men over their identities as men and husbands, and the emerging importance of the divorce market as a means for social climbing at the turn of the century that would continue to surface in Wharton's social critiques throughout the remainder of her career.

The New Woman Goes Awry

Waythorn, Haskett, and Varick are not the only men in Wharton's fiction to find themselves tangled among the marriage market and the evolving gender roles at the turn of the century. In *The Custom of the Country* (1913), one of Wharton's darkest commentaries on marriage in America, Undine Spragg utilizes the popularity of the divorce market in order to secure a position among the socially and financially elite, since a man's social position can positively or negatively alter the status of the wife. Each of Undine's husbands and one of her friends presents a different portrait of masculinity of the time period, which indicates the growing problem for men in marriage at the turn of the century. Claud Walsingham Popple represents the very effeminate, stereotyped and possibly homosexual artist; Elmer Moffatt represents the male who has responded to the business-like marriage market and stringent upper-class social standards by becoming a crooked, blackmailing businessman; and, finally, Ralph Marvell represents the naïve, old-fashioned man who marries for love and passion but fails at marriage and life because of his lack of funding, a merely intermediary position in high society, and an inability to cope with the evolving marital customs and gender roles.

Before Elmer Moffatt, Undine's first husband, becomes a shrewd businessman, he represents the lowest level of possibility for success in the upper class, according to the higher set to which Undine aspires. Despite Moffatt's lack of physical fitness and attractiveness, he does present Undine with a stronger example of masculinity when they meet again in New York than do, for example, her father, Ralph Marvell, or Claud Walsingham Popple. He doesn't, however, strike Undine as acceptable for a higher, more socially acceptable form of masculinity--the gentleman--in her milieu. Upon seeing Elmer in New York for the first time since her departure from Apex, Undine immediately declares him ungentlemanly and unacceptable in society, saying that "something in his look seemed to promise the capacity to develop into any character he might care to assume; though it did not seem probable that, for the present, that of a gentleman would be among them" (107). Though Undine sees potential in Moffatt, she considers only his appearance in placing this judgment and deems him unable to fulfill his potential because of his somewhat "ungentlemanly" appearance, which she describes as "ruddy," "stoutish," "thick yet compact," and round (106). Throughout the long paragraph in which Undine analyzes Moffatt, she never mentions how his personality, his intelligence, or anything else could bolster his social status. Clearly, she lost interest and divorced Moffatt not because he appeared feminine or weak in action or appearance, but rather because he, like Alice Waythorn's Haskett, did not elevate her financially or socially to suit her aspirations and did not fit the masculine ideal.

When younger and living in Apex, Undine had viewed Elmer as insufficient in regard to his masculinity and potential as a husband; yet she had married him because she harbored feelings for him (the term "love" likely would be a bit strong), an admission she

finally makes at the end of the novel. She left him, however, because he lacked money, sufficient social and business connections, and a well-recognized family name that would boost her to social prominence. When Undine meets him again in New York, however, Elmer reveals his entirely new life situation, and these new developments reignite Undine's interest: he now works as a private secretary for Harmon B. Driscoll, one of the "social potentates whose least doings Mrs. Spragg and Undine had followed from afar in the Apex papers" (27). Though his new connections pique her interest in his up-and-coming status, Undine still does not wish for their own personal connection to become common knowledge, and she stoops as low as Alice Waythorn to ensure that the divorce market's promise does not fail her.

Just as Alice easily transitions through her husbands and seemingly expects them to transition with her without difficulty, Undine presses Elmer to allow her to fluidly transition away from him, their marriage, and the love she never reciprocated. She says to Elmer, "'I don't want Ralph Marvell--or any of them--to know anything. If any of his folks found out, they'd never let him marry me--never! And he wouldn't want to; he'd be so horrified. And it would KILL me, Elmer--it would just kill me! [. . .] Oh, Elmer, if you ever liked me, help me now, and I'll help you if I get the chance!'" (112). Here Undine unabashedly asks her first husband not to reveal their past and to allow *her* to seek her own happiness with another man regardless of his feelings, all because *she* desires to climb socially beyond what he offered her before. Worse still, Undine turns it into a bargain--a business ploy--by saying that if he helps her to avoid scandal and to marry a better husband, she'll return the favor. She has become business-oriented rather than romantically-oriented, as Elmer Moffatt asks her for help getting into the business

world of her upper crowd in return for his silence; despite his previous, and somewhat continuing, romantic interest in Undine, he now thinks of her as a commodity as much or more than he thinks of her romantically. Marriage and divorce, to Undine, are merely business terms, as well. "Never touched by an emotion larger than the desire for position or possession," says Debra MacComb, "Undine, as her name suggests, embodies the seemingly soulless new social class threatening to level the values and traditions of the old New York order" (767). Alice Waythorn discarded Haskett for the same reasons that Undine jettisons Moffatt after their marriage: neither man, regardless of personality or physical characteristics, offers enough wealth, social connections, or aggressiveness in business to maintain a position among the New York elite, although Moffatt now shows an interest in maneuvering into that society.

Unfortunately for deceptive Undine, the typical American man's hunger for wealth evokes a turning of the tables on women who possess her tactics and business savvy in the divorce market. Men in the business world, although concerned with maintaining business friends and connections, also sought individualism and freedom for social mobility and monetary success. When Undine and Elmer meet again, he appears to have gotten on track, claiming that he has become a respectable member of society as a private secretary to Harmon B. Driscoll, a position with which he appears happy and satisfied. But, after having been treated as a meaningless rung on the ladder of social climbing by both Undine and her parents, Elmer realizes he can employ Undine's own method of deceit by blackmailing her father in an underhanded business arrangement. In the following conversation with Mr. Spragg, Undine's father, Elmer demonstrates the New Man's belief that money will lead him to success, happiness, and, though not

specifically mentioned here, a heightened form of masculinity:

> I *do* want to get out of Driscoll's office. [. . .] There's no future there for a fellow like me. I see things big. That's the reason Apex was too tight a fit for me. It's only the little fellows that succeed in little places. New York's my size--without a single alteration. I could prove it to you to-morrow if I could put my hand on fifty thousand dollars. (125)

Now Elmer has become an equal to ruthless Undine Spragg. Before this, Elmer could have been respected among his peers for his apparent honesty and decency, despite his opaque, shady past in Apex, because of his ardent belief in marriage, emotions, and, sadly, Undine.

Now, however, he has become perpetually unsatisfied with his social station like Undine and has learned that the way to successfully infiltrate high society stems from stepping on whomever necessary in order to acquire the wealth that MacComb says defined all too many Americans, primarily the middle class, at this time. Once the *nouveaux riches,* those not born into sets such as Ralph Marvell's, began to acquire money, they embraced capitalism and became greedy far beyond those in the higher classes to which they aspired. This avarice within Undine and Elmer, though typical in the middle class, perturbs Ralph and his family as they already have money and social respect and do not need to further their class distinction as these members of the *nouveaux riches* do. According to MacComb, "the ambiguity generated around the concept of need was crucial to fostering the high-intensity consumption that characterized Undine Spragg's America; as consumers lost a secure sense of what was necessary and seized upon products that promised a life of 'creditability' or 'respectability,' the process of consumption was equated with social survival" (768). American women who adhered to this form of thinking, though admirable for their fight to usurp the former patriarchy that had for so long forced them into oppression, have, in a sense, *embraced* an aspect of

the masculine influence on society by their heavy involvement with capitalism and conspicuous consumption, as men, not women, created and influenced this capitalistic form of society and government. While Undine has been called one of Wharton's New Woman characters, the term only fits partially because Undine has not become totally independent. Though her mind remains independent and intelligent enough to turn her marital life into a business, Undine still relies on men to provide for her and to achieve the social status she covets.

Upon Mr. Spragg's denial of his business request, Elmer quickly looks for someone else who can perhaps provide him with what he needs to move up the social ladder. Ralph Marvell, his eventual selection for partner in his social climbing scheme, presents a weaker portrait of masculinity in Elmer's eyes because of his lack of assertiveness, his naiveté, and his reliance on his social connections rather than his own successes to maintain his name in high society. The real estate brokers who had previously worked with Marvell "had done so only with the hope of profiting by his social connections" (230), and even at this they considered him a failure. When Moffatt approaches him with his plan to purchase a small piece of real estate from which he could also profit, Marvell again displays his gullibility and inability to think independently. Throughout their business engagement, Ralph becomes almost femininely "dazzled" by Elmer and thinks "that [the plan] seemed all right while he talked of it with its originator, but vaguely wrong when he thought it over afterward" (231). He then decides to consult his grandfather. This again distinguishes Ralph's portrait of masculinity from Elmer's, as Elmer has become the more "masculine" deceiver and intelligent businessman out to boost his own name while naïve, innocent Ralph allows himself to be "dazzled" and

ignorantly goes along with Elmer just because the plan "seems" all right. Clearly, Ralph knows little of the masculine business world, not even the fringes that Elmer resides in at the time, and "Ralph had never seen his way clearly in that dim underworld of affairs where men of the Moffatt and Driscoll type moved like shadowy destructive monsters beneath the darting small fry of the surface" (231). Elmer triumphs over Marvell both here in the business world and, eventually, with the business-like marriage market once he marries Undine because Ralph does not possess the intelligence and ability to deceive that men in the business world need in this "dog-eat-dog" world of an American consumed by capitalism regardless of the costs or of whomever falls underfoot.

Eventually, after marriages to Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles, who offer their own portraits of "unsatisfactory" masculinity, Undine returns to Elmer Moffatt. In typical fashion for a Wharton novel, no resolution comes for the protagonist. When Elmer unexpectedly arrives at the home she shares with her third husband Raymond de Chelles in Italy, Undine immediately upgrades her opinion of him once he mentions that he had dined the previous evening with the Driscolls, Shallums, and Mrs. Rolliver, all members of high society in New York. Undine happily notes that "one could see from [Elmer's] tone that he was one of them and wanted her to know it. And nothing could have given her a completer sense of his achievement--of the number of millions he must be worth" (459). Wharton has now offered through this relationship alone the commentary that many American women had become victims of their own business-savvy machine rather than victors over men. Many men, like women, have become unemotional Americans who seek monetary value to determine another human being's worth and potential for friendships and relationships. Undine grows excited at Moffatt's

reappearance in her life not because he has grown as a person, but because his pocketbook has expanded greatly and he has become "the greatest American collector" (458). She now finds Moffatt as excellent husband material because his status can renew her position in high society; she has also, however, found a man who has proven himself dishonest, capable of blackmail, and concerned with nothing other than fame and fortune. Though many negative qualities surface in this change to Moffatt's previous portrait, they do mimic Undine's own qualities. Cynthia Griffin Wolff says that Elmer "is crude and callous; yet he seems to have some ability to feel affection (for he sympathizes with his stepson [Paul]). Where business is concerned, he has a capacity to destroy others with no qualm. Thus, he [. . .] is complex--perhaps beyond our capacity to judge in any simple and definitive way" (16). Elmer also, initially, does not appear, in his younger years, to pursue Undine for fame and fortune but rather out of pure romantic interest, unlike her. If the critic can derive one primary point from Wharton's characterization of Elmer, however, it would be that this form of the New Man will lead to corruption in business and the downfall of marriage in America.

While Wharton portrays Elmer Moffatt as the failure-turned-success because of his somewhat ruthless climb atop business and society, she casts Ralph Marvell as the portrait of the effeminized failure at marriage not simply because he naively equates feminine beauty with intelligence and kindness, but because he does not fit the masculine ideal that Undine envisions. Wharton's first detailed description of Ralph immediately contrasts with both his family and "real" masculinity. After having received a quality education at Harvard and Oxford, he returned home to enjoy a life of poetry and "dabbling," living comfortably but not wealthily. Though Wharton tells her readers that

upper society accepts this somewhat relaxed, lackadaisical attitude toward living, she also indicates that Marvell already has chosen not to follow one of his family's commands: that he engage in an acceptable society marriage. Upon thinking of his family's wishes, Ralph

> smiled at the idea as he sat crouched among his secret treasures. Marry--but whom in the name of light and freedom? The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders; the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box. It ought all to have been transacted on the Stock Exchange. (81)

Therefore, Ralph already recognizes, well before meeting Undine, that marriage has negatively transitioned from patriarchal domination to an extension of those same patriarchal values with the developing business-like domination of women, specifically the "Invaders," or the *nouveaux riches*. This indicates that he does not believe that money should play a role in selecting marriage partners. This view of marriage sets him up for a great fall once he enters into marriage with Undine Spragg.

As the New Woman's views of marriage evolved in America, she typically expressed less interest in men's sexuality and more interest in money, education, her own freedom of sexuality, and working in order to either climb socially or become totally independent (Lavender). Undine uses this freedom of sexuality in her climb up the social ladder not to fulfill her own sexual desires, but because she knows the definition and expectations for masculinity include virility and even promiscuity among both the middle and upper classes. This explains why she appears very sexually charged with her lover Peter Van Degen but never consummates their relationship. During the nineteenth century, men were believed to experience tremendous, nearly uncontrollable sexual urges that must be expressed without judgment; in other words, the "real" man was virile, passionate, and often sexually promiscuous (Rotundo 121). Though members of higher

society did not necessarily applaud promiscuity, they accepted it as both a masculine trait and a matter not worth disturbing the social order over, as society continues to accept Ven Degen despite his notorious promiscuity[1].

As Ralph and Undine sit with his family over dinner discussing Mabel Libscomb's marriage prior to their own, Undine forecasts impending disaster for her marriage to Ralph. After saying that Mabel's husband has done nothing wrong to warrant a divorce, she says that "they like each other well enough. But he's been a disappointment to her. He isn't in the right set, and I think Mabel realizes she'll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of him" (95). Mabel, like Undine, cares only for the social standing that her husband can aquire for her, and Undine unsurprisingly supports her. Ralph notices this comment, but he ignorantly assumes that Undine's physical beauty signifies interior beauty and moral goodness, as well. As Ralph falls into the role of the stereotypical poet blindly consumed by romance, Wharton pointedly poses the question: "When she shone on him like that what did it matter what nonsense she talked?" (163). Continually, Undine proves her worthlessness as his wife, but Ralph falls into the age-old belief that a marriage and love complete the person. Although he once held firm that he would not marry, he mistakenly decides that success and salvation will come only through marriage and Undine: "Ralph imagines he sees in her *his* salvation.

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[1] Rufus Beaufort in *The Age of Innocence* would demonstrate the same avoidance of social ostracism several years after the publication of *The Custom of the Country*. Beaufort cheats on his wife Regina while unabashedly engaging in a scandalous affair with Annie Ring; yet, his wealth and social standing allow him to remain unscathed, though disapprovingly whispered about, among New York's elite. Ralph Marvell's portrait of masculinity would have suffered had he engaged in similar activities, but society at the time excused a man's sexual frivolities much easier than a woman's, again evident from *The Age of Innocence* when the Countess Olenska receives scorn and ostracism from the elite set for her divorce while Beaufort continues in high society despite his far more scandalous nature.

Just as Undine perpetually holds up the mirror to check that radiant complexion, Ralph holds Undine up as the female muse who he imagines will complement, develop, and mirror his poetic, his romantic, potential" (Hume 145). Though The New Woman had fought for independence from men and had begun to succeed, Ralph's ignoring of his intuitional urging that he need not marry indicates further weakness in judgment for The New Man who struggled to break from traditional beliefs that marriage and muses completed the man and the poet, respectively. His eventual failure in marriage and consequential suicide imply that the effeminate man--not to mention the writer--is both naïve and worthless as a husband.

Ralph not only fails to achieve material wealth, but he does not even attempt to involve himself with the search, except when he turns to Moffatt to procure funds to keep Paul once Undine abandons him to embark upon another quest for of a more affluent husband. Unlike Elmer Moffatt, who seeks wealth and becomes a collector by the end of the novel, Ralph Marvell's

> sense of self does not depend on the house in Washington Square itself so much as on the ideas that it stands for. His relationship to constitutive objects involves the worldview those objects represent, like the books and sketches in his room, which both inform and reflect the aesthetic and intellectual groundwork of his identity. (Sassoubre 693)

As Ticien Marie Sassoubre implies here, Marvell's depth of character aids him in seeing beyond the "real man's" obsession with merely collecting and boasting of material possessions; Marvell instead owns things that hold special value to him sentimentally or emotionally. Charles Bowen accurately describes the plight of the literary, the romantic, the non-businessman during a conversation with Laura Fairford:

> I'm not implying that Ralph isn't interested in his wife--he's a passionate, a pathetic exception. But even he has to conform to an environment where all the romantic values are reversed. Where does the real life of most American men

> lie? In some woman's drawing-room or in their offices? The answer's obvious, isn't it? The emotional centre of gravity's not the same in the two hemispheres. In the effete societies it's love, in our new one it's business. (189)

Bowen's commentary illuminates the "peculiar" circumstances of Ralph's character that make him an "exception" (190), as Bowen says, to American masculinity: Ralph Marvell is passionate and romantic. The new custom of the country has left Marvell behind--Undine and the new America does not make room for a man who lacks fame, fortune, and business savvy.

Marvell, along with Undine's third husband Raymond de Chelles, does, however, exemplify the evolution of male involvement in child-rearing. When Undine more or less forgets her son and focuses on social climbing, just as Alice Waythorn places Lily on the back burner, the husband steps in to assume the feminine, maternal role. Paul, Undine's child with Ralph, becomes a casualty of Undine's use of the divorce market.

From the beginning, Wharton does not portray Undine as a responsible, maternal figure; this recession of motherhood evokes the evolution of the maternal husband, which Ralph eventually becomes. At Paul's birth, he, "from his beautiful pink cradle, was already interfering with his mother's plans" (182). In fact, an event that typically excited not only parents but friends and relatives, as well, receives no mention whatsoever. The reader simply knows that Undine expects a child, and suddenly he arrives. The joy and excitement surrounding motherhood never comes for Undine, and he immediately detracts from her pleasure, as her husband decides to relegate her to a socially "weaker" area of town to curb the expenses of birthing a child. Here, again, Undine expects to never sacrifice, to never want for anything even when family needs arise; she still cares only for social position. She worries what her friends will think of her without her own means of transportation, so, virtually abandoning husband and son, she engages in what

appears to remain an unconsummated relationship with Peter Van Degen, a socially well-connected man who can provide what Ralph financially cannot.

While Undine demonstrates a further decline from Alice Waythorn's role as a mother, Martha Patterson notes an equally intriguing connection to *The House of Mirth*:

> Lily Bart's imaginary embrace of Nettie Struther's baby at the end of the novel is depicted as a kind of primeval return to a 'natural' state (mother love was the highest form of love, according to Darwin). As she enters her drug-induced sleep, she feels the 'tender pressure of its body [. . .] still close to hers: the recovered warmth flowed through her once more, she yielded to it, sank into it, and slept.' Undine, by contrast, cries bitterly at the news of her pregnancy and later uses her son as leverage in an act of extortion. Such 'unnatural' behavior suggests the extent to which she is subject to reversion. (225)

At no point within the novel does Undine experience this internal maternal instinct or connection that all mothers supposedly experience with their children. Furthermore, Lily, though somewhat greedy herself, sought a husband out of mere desperation for survival, but she eventually finds the courage to resist the temptation to concede to social demands by marrying Sim Rosedale out of her need of a husband and his need for a wife, as a man of his status was expected to marry someone socially acceptable. Suzanne Rose says that "Lily cannot bear the lack of ethics this requires--she lacks the qualities of a corporate CEO--so she commits suicide, as do many who cannot reconcile ethics and sound business decisions" ("RE: [SPAM]"). Undine, however, *does* possess these instincts that make her the success that Lily could never be because of her scruples. Eventually, Ralph reaches his limit with how much he can stand in regard to Undine's passivity and unscrupulousness when his wife forgets to take her son to his own birthday celebration at his grandmother's house.

Ralph thereafter assumes the role of mother in furthering Wharton's representation of The New American Man in a way similar to Haskett in "The Other

Two"; this time, however, he must use more force to take more complete control of his child's life now that the weak maternal instincts and poor transitioning between husbands seen in "The Other Two" has increasingly worsened as Undine unhesitantly abandons her marital and maternal roles altogether. The first instance of this switch in parental roles comes when Ralph attends Paul's birthday party and becomes concerned over not only the child's feelings but also over Undine's lackadaisical attitude toward the boy. Once he learns of his wife's oversight, he says that he must rush home to see "the poor little chap" and that he must make excuses for his son to his family (191)--clearly he expresses the maternal concern for his child's feelings that the mother does not. Later, Undine becomes very "ill," evidently from "monotony," as her doctor says. The doctor prescribes a rather suspect cure and justifies this idea by saying that someone with such a "high-strung nature" usually improves with his recommended "dash to Paris or London" (229). Unsurprisingly, Undine, though likely not truly ill at all but rather pouting from a lack of finances, gripes to Mrs. Heeny about her son's noise and has his bed moved nearer his father: "His scampering overhead disturbed her sleep, and his bed was moved into the day nursery, above his father's room. The child's early romping did not trouble Ralph, since he himself was always awake before daylight" (230). While many mothers often find comfort in knowing their children are near, this mother does not; the father finds the son more tolerable than the mother.

Ralph later directly connects his concern for Paul with his role as provider for his family. While conversing with Clare Van Degen about his troubles, a subject about which he felt he could not speak to his wife, Ralph says, "A man doesn't know till he tries it how killing uncongenial work is, and how it destroys the power of doing what one's fit

for, even if there's time for both. But there's Paul to be looked out for, and I daren't chuck my job--I'm in mortal terror of its chucking me…" (282). Ralph's confession evinces the predominance of his concern for Paul over his disgust with his own unsuitable work situation. Once he grows physically ill, Undine writes him mechanical letters while she vacations overseas, and Ralph realizes that "on the last page [of all Undine's letters] she hoped Paul was well and sent him a kiss; but she never made a suggestion concerning his care or asked a question about his pursuits" (270). Ralph has now fully assumed the role of mother, but he fails for the final time.

Following the debacle of their marriage, Wharton clarifies her point surrounding the problem within Ralph's masculinity: the man who possesses both masculine and feminine characteristics fails, and a man simply cannot fulfill adequately the role of a mother in a child's life. After recovering from his illness, Ralph prioritizes his life and states that

> his two objects in life were his boy and his book. The boy was incomparably the stronger argument, yet the less serviceable in filling the void. Ralph felt his son all the while, and all through his other feelings; but he could not think about him actively and continuously, could not forever exercise his eager empty dissatisfied mind on the relatively simple problem of clothing, educating and amusing a little boy of six. (367-8)

Though not saying that a child should monopolize either a man's or a woman's attention, Wharton seems to imply that a woman can care for a child more naturally than a man. Now that Undine has left him entirely, Ralph finds that his work, though not necessarily "masculine" for the time, still pulls him toward the masculine desire to achieve some amount of fame in order to prove himself and to please those around him. Though Ralph admittedly loves to write and to read, Wharton also informs the reader that "he might have begun sooner if he had not been urged on by [his friends'] watchful fondness.

Everyone wanted him to write--everybody had decided that he ought to, that he would, that he must be persuaded to" (368-9). This social pressure turns his love for writing, which should have been life affirming and a step in the right direction, into a final attempt to assert his masculinity and to defy the divorce market that had wrecked his life. When men failed at their work, society blamed such disappointment on either "poor character" or "vice and debauchery" (Rotundo 179), and Ralph certainly does not want his family and friends to believe that his marriage failed because of either factor. These incessant expectations, coupled with his wife's indifference toward him and their son, lead to Ralph's tragic suicide.

Elmer Moffatt and Ralph Marvell serve as Wharton's expressions of her anxiety over the raging divorce market, and this may surprise some readers and critics that she sympathizes so heavily with the men against whom her own sex had railed for so long in order to achieve equal respect rather than to continue living in subservience. Moffatt, though initially a mere casualty at the hands of ruthless Undine, learns from The New Woman's harsh, deceptive methods and climbs the social ladder, eventually winning worldly wealth and, consequently, Undine. Ralph Marvell, though clearly portrayed as the man with the best, truest heart in the novel, presents another sort of concern for Wharton. Despite his love, devotion, and care for his son, Ralph Marvell's version of masculinity could never counter the much sharper, greedier, masquerading New Woman. He cannot match wits with such a person for his emotions and poetic nature blind him from the truth; despite his effeminacy, he still cannot replace the mother that a child so needs in life, thus forcing the child to become a casualty of marriage gone awry. So, in Wharton's eyes, where is the man who could counter The New Woman's frightful

rampage throughout America? Then, unfortunately, no American man proved satisfactory, and only the Elmer Moffatts could keep pace in the abysmal, deluding marriage/divorce market at the turn of the century.

Conclusion

Now that feminist critics, gender critics, and queer theorists confront sexuality, a greater understanding of American culture and history can come through characters like Lawrence Selden or Ralph Marvell. Edith Wharton wrote at a time in which she could more boldly assert her critiques of the marriage and divorce markets but could not as easily develop "deviant" sexualities within her characters without likely appearing scandalous. Therefore, we can scrutinize, as I have done, and piece together evidence and research that may indicate intermediate sexualities within her characters as an explanation for their preferences, actions, physical characteristics, and lifestyles. Wharton once told her editor, William Crary Brownell, that "I write about what I see, what I happen to be nearest to, which is surely better than doing cowboys de chic. . . ." ("To William" 259), and she knew well the typical life of and societal schema for the homosexual, bisexual, or effeminate men of her time period. In none of the works I have analyzed does Wharton appear to portray effeminate or homosexual men as incompetent or dreadful but rather as men who are often misunderstood, confused, and trapped within their self-constructed closets while their female counterparts, like Lily Bart, also struggle to escape from their own patriarchal prisons. These men within Wharton's works fail in the prescribed roles for masculinity and marriage not because Wharton dislikes feminine characteristics in men, but rather because these men, with few exceptions, could not succeed under the growing pressures and increasing rules that left them confused about the world around them and their own identities.

Lawrence Selden allows a silent "word" to pass between him and Lily as he mourns her death, but perhaps this silence signifies more than his fear of speaking the

love that these two friends shared. If Selden, as I have argued, possesses a homosexual or bisexual nature, then this silence until Lily's death may represent the culmination of his inability to tell Lily why he had always avoided intimacy and marriage with her, as well as the lack of vocabulary from which he could draw to share his painful truth. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that silence, though devoid of sound, speaks just as loudly as words for the homosexual: "'Closetedness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence--not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (3). Just as James's John Marcher does not understand himself well enough to voice his reasons for lacking desire for May Bartram, Selden also, as men have and will continue to do for centuries, grapples with the dichotomy of internal emotions and truths versus the limitations placed upon men by society, specifically heterosexuals.

The turn of the century saw great progress for women throughout America, though some of this progress led to the unfortunate development of women like Undine Spragg. The time period also saw what I would call a great deterioration of values and desires for men and women alike as the result of male emasculation at home and in the work place, which led to the homosexual panic that ignited the still ongoing heterosexual/homosexual battle throughout the country. Society would have frowned upon Elmer Moffatt in his younger years for his lack of money, lack of education, and lack of social connections. Without such attributes, such a man could fall under suspicion of effeminacy or even homosexuality simply because a "real man" cannot survive on masculine physical characteristics alone, though society also required these for success as a man.

While the women who sought independence and freedom from men often sought equality and recognition of similarities between the two sexes, men tried desperately to separate themselves from feminine characteristics or activities of any kind. Kathy Fedorko says that "Wharton uses similarities between [Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden] to stress the commonalities of female and male ways of being and, thereby, the possibility of a fe/male self" (22). It is, perhaps, these similarities that frighten and confuse Selden. His "Republic of the Self" suggests that he envisions a realm beyond earth that allows for the merging of the sexes and of beliefs, but he knows that his Republic will not develop in the natural world in his lifetime, and, therefore, shies away from allowing himself to express his sexuality. Of the male characters I have examined, only Claud Walsingham Popple displays a comfortable attitude toward his effeminate nature, and this appears to stem from high society's need for an excellent portrait painter who supports covering up the physical flaws of his subjects. Popple does not speak often, but when he does he supports his society rather than critiquing it for its many flaws. That alone indicates Popple's willingness to lie or to hide the truth in order to retain both his professional and social positions, as Popple, in fact, displays more effeminate and stereotypically homosexual characteristics than any of the other characters I have considered.

Popple's use of his profession to preserve his social life epitomizes the stance taken by many men and women to marriage. After patriarchy began to crumble in favor of equality within gender roles, women like Alice Waythorn and Undine Spragg utilized the increasing availability of divorces in order to secure high social positions with more emphasis placed on the monetary and social value of the marriages rather than on the romantic or sexual aspects. David Holbrook says,

> [Undine's] sexual life is only a subsidiary element in this *need to be seen*. The normal male reader might expect the sexual theme to be related to this voracious need, and no doubt it is. But there is a sense in which sexual love is something to which in itself Undine is *indifferent* [. . . .] Undine's attitude to sex is totally subservient to her husband's or lover's rôle in "society." (78)

Undine's business-like approach to marriage becomes vividly apparent throughout but primarily when she engages in an affair with Peter Van Degen, a notoriously promiscuous man highly regarded in her social milieu despite his poor reputation as a husband to his wife Clare. Undine never consummates their relationship, much to his chagrin, because she desires him only for social elevation, but not for anything romantic. Through Undine's manipulation and business-like approach to relationships with Van Degen and her husbands, the growing trend of capitalism and conspicuous consumption's effects upon marriage becomes apparent.

Unfortunately for current society, the Undines of the world have not entirely faded. Men and women still fight over gender roles; society generally considers the man the head of the household, even down to still practicing the tradition of the woman taking the man's surname upon their union. Wharton offers the world a glimpse of how we as a nation struggled with sexuality and its implications. Lawrence Selden's indecisiveness and confusion, along with Lily Bart's tragic demise, demonstrates that being true to society rather than to oneself does not necessarily lead to the happiness one expects wealth, fame, and social position to provide. Ralph Marvell shows us that, in the business-like world of the divorce market, a man falls subservient to the woman who would jettison him far sooner than surrender her social position to reciprocate his love. These and other tragic characters illuminate the truth behind the evolving terms of masculinity in Edith Wharton's era. Sadly, the painful truth behind the confusion and doubt these men experience still can apply to America today, despite its vastly improved

tolerance of changing gender roles and intermediate sexualities. Though many of her characters allow society to eradicate their desires, voices, and dreams, Edith Wharton lived a dream that far too many Americans will never fulfill. She simply spoke the truth by promoting the realistic nature of the literature of the time and told America it needed to change.

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