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Social Conventions in the Works of Edith Wharton

Tereza Kučerová

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Mgr. Šárka Bubíková, Ph.D.

Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

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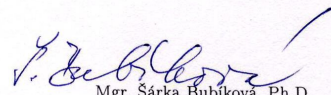
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Poděkování

Děkuji Mgr. Šárce Bubíkové, Ph.D za její spolupráci a odborné rady, které mi poskytovala během konzultací k mé bakalářské práci.

Abstract

This bachelor paper is concerned with Edith Wharton, an American author of the late 19th and early 20th century, and the society she was born into. The aim of the paper is to analyze the social conventions of the New York upper classes as reflected in Wharton's novels. At the beginning of the paper, the life of Edith Wharton is described briefly and also the summaries of the novels researched are mentioned. The body of the paper focuses on the social conventions controlling the life of upper-class New Yorkers. It also deals with the position of a woman in elite circles and the opinion of its members on marriage as well as adultery and divorce. Subsequently, leisure time of the upper classes is discussed, with ball and opera events being described in greater detail. The paper is based on Wharton's works *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence* and a number of relevant secondary sources.

Key words:

Wharton, Edith; upper-class society; social conventions; Gilded Age

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá Edith Whartonovou, americkou spisovatelkou konce 19. a začátku 20. století, a společností, do které se narodila. Cílem je analyzovat sociální konvence vyšší společenské třídy žijící v New Yorku a jejich odraz v románech Edith Whartonové. Na začátku práce je stručně popsán život autorky, stejně jako stručné děje zkoumaných románů. Jádro práce se zabývá sociálními konvencemi, které ovládaly životy newyorských horních vrstev. Dále se práce zabývá pozicí ženy v této společnosti a názorem na sňatek, nevěru a rozvod. Poté se zaměřuje na způsob, jakým trávily horní vrstvy volný čas, s důrazem na plesy a opery. Tato práce je založena na dílech *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence* a další příslušné sekundární literatuře.

Klíčová slova:

Whartonová, Edith; vyšší společenská vrstva; společenská pravidla; Zlatý věk

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1. INTRODUCTION

This bachelor paper is concerned with the social conventions as reflected in the novels of Edith Wharton. Its aim is to analyze these novels and to describe the life of the upper classes living in New York of the late 19th and beginning of the 20th century. The main focus is on Wharton's opinion on the rigid social conventions of her time and the critique of the world she described in her works.

The second chapter briefly describes Edith Wharton's life. Also, brief summaries of each of the novels researched, i.e. *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence*, are mentioned in this part.

The third chapter deals with the changing society during the Gilded Age of America, as well as Progressive Era. First, the explanations of both these terms are given. Subsequently, the arrival of new millionaires in New York and its impacts are described. This chapter also deals with the position of an upper-class woman in the society and the differences between the social conventions in New York and Paris.

In the fourth chapter, the main focus is on the relationships as described in Wharton's novels. The difference between Ellen and May in *The Age of Innocence* is researched, as well as the elite circle's opinion on marriage, adultery and also divorce.

The following chapter is concerned with the leisure time of the upper classes, with the main focus on the importance of attending balls and operas. Additionally, Wharton's New York is described, as well as the typical upper-class residences the elite lived in.

This bachelor paper is primarily based on Wharton's pieces of work *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence*. These novels were used as primary sources. However, a number of secondary sources were used as well, including her interior design manual *The Decoration of Houses*, critical edition of *The Age of Innocence* edited by Candace Waid and several critical articles dealing with Wharton's novels.

2. THE LIFE OF EDITH WHARTON AND BRIEF SUMMARIES OF THE NOVELS RESEARCHED

Edith Newbold Jones (1862-1937), “author of more than 40 volumes - novels, short stories, poetry, non-fiction”, (Werlock, 2008) was born into the carefully guarded upper class of New York society. When Edith was four years old, her family moved to Europe where they spent 5 years traveling across the Continent. Young Edith was educated privately and spent most of her time reading books and studying languages, literature, philosophy, science, and, most significantly, art which later became one of her passionate interests. She first started to write short stories and poetry. However, as Candace Waid reminds us, the idea that a daughter of the aristocratic Joneses “would become a writer was perhaps too bizarre to be imagined”. Writers were commonly disdained by the elite circles and “writing was considered to be somewhere between manual labor and the occult arts”. (Waid, 2002a, 228) Indeed, Edith was raised in a social circle where those who wanted to succeed, especially in an artistic or intellectual career, were frowned on. She was a perfect example of a traditional upper-class woman – her life purpose was to find a marriage partner from her own social class. This required constant attendance at balls and large parties as well as much attention to fashion and etiquette.

After the Joneses returned back to New York, Edith made her debut into society in 1879. In 1885, she married banker Edward “Teddy” Robbins Wharton, a man who was 12 years older than her. Unfortunately, the marriage was unhappy from the beginning for, except for coming from the same background, the couple had nothing in common. Edward “was a man of limited intelligence and no artistic or intellectual interest”. (Brooke, 2007) He also suffered from mental illness which he inherited from his father. Moreover, the relationship lacked sexual desire. Wharton “put some of the blame on her mother, who had refused to tell her the facts of life before her wedding”. (Brooke, 2007) For she felt emotionally trapped in her unsatisfactory marriage, Wharton also had an affair with Morton Fullerton, a journalist for *The Times*. Later, in 1913, after nearly 30 years of marriage, she divorced her husband and moved to Paris, a city which served as a rich source of inspiration for some of her novels. Among her close friends was Henry James whom she regularly visited in England. Throughout the war, Wharton supported charities in France and Belgium.

The author's writing style was characterized by a frequent use of irony. As Abby Werlock, President of Edith Wharton Society, adds:

A naturally gifted storyteller, Wharton wrote novels and short fiction notable for their vividness, satire, irony, and wit. Her complex characters and subtly delivered point-of-view make the reading of Wharton's fiction both challenging and rewarding, while her own life illustrates the difficulties that a woman of her era had to surmount to find self-realization. (Werlock 2008)

In this paper, three novels written by Edith Wharton are discussed, namely *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence*. The first one, *The House of Mirth*, was first published in 1905. The novel tells the story of Lily Bart, a beautiful girl from the best society. After the death of her mother, she lives with her aunt, Mrs. Peniston. Lily's main goal is to find the most suitable (rich) husband. However, she rejects a number of wealthy and perspective men recklessly, hoping she can always do better. As a result, after the death of her aunt, Lily finds herself with hardly any money. Moreover, she is expelled from the society due to her gambling addiction and also for the false stories of her having an affair with Mr. Dorset whom, as well as his wife, she accompanied on his journey across Europe. Therefore, Lily is forced to live on the edge of society, among working class people. In the end, she manages to pay off all her debts but accidentally overdoses herself on sleeping pills and dies in sleep.

First published in 1913, *The Custom of the Country* tells the story of Undine Spragg, a young social climber who arrives in New York with her family from the fictional city of Apex. Undine's only intention in life is to rise to the top of New York's high society. Indeed, she manages to do so by getting married four times, each time stepping higher on the social ladder. In the end, she marries Elmer Moffatt, a man from Apex who was also her first husband and whom she had divorced for he had not possessed the sufficient wealth. However, by now Moffat has made a fortune, making a perfect partner for the ambitious woman. Yet, in the end of the novel, despite having everything she has ever wanted, Undine expresses her dissatisfaction once again, wishing she could marry an Ambassador.

The last novel researched in this paper, *The Age of Innocence*, was published in 1920. The following year, in 1921, Wharton was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for this highly praised piece of writing and became the first woman to win the award. The satirical novel, which criticizes the rigid conventions of upper society, is set in the Old New York of the late 19th century and is a story of Newland Archer, a young upper-class lawyer. The male protagonist, despite being engaged to beautiful May Welland, finds himself deeply in love with her cousin Countess Olenska who returned from Europe where she had lived with her husband, a Polish Count, whom she intends to divorce. She asks Newland for legal advice on her divorce. He supports Ellen's decision, however, he feels compelled to change her mind to avoid a public scandal. May soon realizes her future husband's desire for her cousin, therefore she pushes forward their wedding date. Nevertheless, Archer remains in love with Ellen even after the wedding which makes his wife intervene once again by informing Newland of being pregnant. As a result, he ends his affair with Countess Olenska who promptly returns back to Europe. The novel closes with a scene of Newland and his son visiting France in 25 years time. They both intend to visit Countess Olenska. In the end, however, Archer decides not to see her, wishing to live with his memories of the past instead.

Among others of Wharton's respected novels are for instance *Sanctuary* (1903), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *Summer* (1917), *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), *Twilight Sleep* (1927) and *The Children* (1928). She also wrote collections of short stories, such as *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (1910), *Xingu and Other Stories* (1916) or *Old New York* (1924); and literature of non-fiction, including *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), *In Morocco* (1920) and her own autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934). (Merriman, 2007)

Edith Wharton died of a stroke on 11 August 1937 in France. (Merriman, 2007) She indisputably belongs to one of the major figures in American literary history and continues to influence world authors even more than 70 years after her death.

3. CHANGING SOCIETY IN THE GILDED AGE OF AMERICA

3.1 Definition of the Gilded Age

The plot of the novels discussed in this paper takes place in the second half of the 19th century, an era commonly referred to as the “Gilded Age”. Before discussing the conventions and habits of the high society, this term must be defined clearly.

According to Elisabeth Israels Perry and Karen Manners Smith, as they state in their book *The Gilded Age and Progressive Era: a student companion*, the Gilded Age is a term used to describe a period in American history of the turn of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the beginning of the era has not been clearly defined with some historians considering the year of 1865 (the end of the Civil War in the United States) as the start of the Gilded Age, while others start the period in 1873, when a satirical book *The Gilded Age* was published by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley. Other historians start the era even later, in 1877, the year marking the end of the post-Civil War era. The years that followed after the Gilded Age are called the Progressive Era, starting, as some historians claim, in 1900. However, as Perry and Smith write in their book, “others see the two periods more interconnected, with ‘progressive’ ideas developing much earlier out of Gilded Age economic, political and social conditions” (Perry and Smith, 6). They also claim that the Progressive Era ended in 1921, with the retirement of president Woodrow Wilson.

The term Gilded Age refers to a period of economic growth as well as the creation of a modern industrial economy and its rapid expansion in the United States. Perry and Smith explain:

Between the 1870s and the early 1900s, the number and variety of manufactured goods available for purchase increased beyond imagination... The increased efficiency gained by mass production also lowered the price of manufactured goods. As a result, between 1877 and 1900, the buying power of wage earners rose by nearly 50 percent. (Perry and Smith, 6)

In addition, new industries were created, with the old ones expanding. A great deal of corporations was created and these were subsequently combined into trusts and monopolies.

This resulted in the rise of new political issues questioning whether the government should impose regulations on people in charge of these financial corporations in order to limit their power. (Perry and Smith, 6)

Furthermore, immigration increased rapidly during the era, with most of the immigrants being African Americans and settling in the cities in America, far from their traditional rural settlements, in the hope to find jobs under better working conditions. Perry and Smith note that “these expanding urban working classes not only changed the nation’s ethnic and racial makeup, but soon were an important factor in determining the country’s future political course”. (Perry and Smith, 7)

Technological changes took place too and lots of patents were issued for new inventions. Among some of the new inventions in technology in the late 19th century were for instance telephones, air brakes for trains, sewing machines and, most significantly, electricity.

On the other hand, the rapid change in economy caused many problems. Unemployment, as well as race and ethnic issues, were among some of the frequent concerns government had to deal with. Also, “living conditions in the nation’s industrial cities became increasingly congested and unhealthy”. (Perry and Smith, 7) A great deal of reforms was proposed by Americans who worried about their future, suggesting that “restricting immigration and controlling social behaviour were the answers”. It was not until later, during the Progressive Era with its interest in political reforms, that the overall social and political situation in America improved. The supporters of the new reforms called themselves progressives and were mainly members of the business and professional worlds. As described by Perry and Smith in their book:

...they supported a larger role for government in assuring human welfare, but otherwise rejected revolutionary or radical solutions, such as the wholesale restructuring that socialist or communist systems would bring about. (Perry and Smith, 7)

The most significant achievement during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era was the fact that the United States has gained a status of the world power. The American government even protected some of the smaller nations and lots of Americans openly defined themselves as

imperialists. During World War I, the American government was lending money to the European countries involved in the war and by 1918, “these financial transactions had made the United States the world’s strongest economic power”. (Perry and Smith, 8)

3.2 New millionaires

The rapid economic growth, prosperity and boom in stock companies, which took place in the late 19th New York, attracted lots of business people who moved into the city to expand their business or to make transactions. However, these newcomers were often disdained by the members of New York’s society who felt threatened by their newly acquired position and wealth. Edith Wharton’s character, Mr. Beaufort from *The Age of Innocence*, is an example of such a disreputable man. According to Candace Waid as she claims in the critical edition of *The Age of Innocence*, “Beaufort represents the power of money as fortunes changed hands amid the wildly fluctuating economy of the post-Civil War United States”. (Waid, 2002f, 297)

Waid explains further, saying that when writing about Mr. Beaufort and his business failure, Wharton has been inspired by a real financial failure known as the Panic which took place in 1873 as a result of foreign financiers arriving in the city. As described in the then newspapers, such as the *New York Times* or *The Nation*, people were in the state of panic, frustrated by the “growing distrust of foreign investors amid the emergence of an international economy”. (Waid, 2002f, 298) In reality, as well as in Wharton’s novel, the crisis was “experienced locally in relation to New York banks and individually in the financial ruin of respected members of the traditional elite”. (Waid, 2002f, 298) As Carmen Trammell Skaggs mentions in her article *Looking through the Opera Glasses: Performance and Artifice in The Age of Innocence*:

Newland’s New York circle looked on with dismay as men like Julius Beaufort, with a “regrettable past,” found success in the business world and gained access to society. Despite the apparent acceptance of Beaufort by the elite, however, its members still persisted in asking themselves behind closed doors, “Who was Beaufort?”. (Skaggs, 2004)

Skaggs also reminds us that once a member of the elite society expressed their support for a certain person, a piece of art or a movement, it soon became acceptable among other members of the high society. She suggests that “this explains the great efforts the elite made to keep the

newcomers out of the Academy and its inner circle". However, Beaufort manages to overcome these limitations and his eventual acceptance by the inner circle predicts the incoming transition of the New York society. Indeed, the enormous change in people's attitudes towards the city businessmen is also manifested in the end of Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, when Archer's son Dallas expresses his intentions to marry Beaufort's daughter. Despite the fact that Mr. Beaufort used to be considered unethical and older people still remembered his failure, his daughter has an entirely different reputation in the postwar world which is freer from the old rigidities. Therefore, Dallas feels confident to get the approval of his fiancée by both his ageing father and the society. (Skaggs, 2004)

The financial depression which continued into the 1880s had a widespread effect and resulted in unfavourable phenomena such as the widening gap between the wealthy and the poor. However, Candace Waid explains that:

...the foreign threat was not just from the foreign investors or, more intimately, outsiders with mysterious past who were making successful entries into the social enclave of Old New York. The foreign threat from mid-century forward was clearly located in the successive waves of immigrants... (Waid, 2002f, 299)

A great number of immigrants entering New York to live in ethnically identified neighborhoods threatened lives of the elite. According to Waid, "at mid-century, over half the population of New York City was foreign born". (Waid, 2002f, 299) She then explains Wharton's intentions for choosing this difficult background as a setting for *The Age of Innocence*:

Wharton chose to write about the social transformation that was taking place in this decade beginning in "the early seventies," because it was the intimate world of her childhood and because this decade encompassed an era of great change. (Waid, 2002e, 311)

Indeed, as Lind Wagner-Martin says in her introduction to Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, "social positions were shifting" during the late 19th century. She also claims that "codes of behaviour were no longer simply accepted; they often were debated. Many feared that their stable, secure 'old New York' would succumb to pressure from the nouveau riche". (Wagner-Martin, 7) Therefore, the members of the elite society spent a great deal of time gossiping

about the newcomers and their “unsuitable positions” in an attempt to make these people look disreputable in the high society.

Since the world of Old New York had changed significantly, there was now a market for new range of books called “popular advice manuals” which first appeared in the city in the 1880s. Suddenly, the newly rich New Yorkers, who had earned their wealth through successful business, were eager to acquire the manners of the elite and aristocracy. As Candace Waid says in her critical edition, one of the most popular examples of such manuals was *Manners and Social Usages* written by Mary Elizabeth Sherwood and first published in 1884. In her book, dedicated to the newly rich and ambitious to become members of the elite circle, Mrs. Sherwood suggests that these former society outsiders can “gain entry into the once-closed ballrooms of the New York elite”. (Waid, 2002e, 312) In one of the chapters called “Fashionable Dancing”, the author even gives advice to the readers “about the appropriateness of types of dances and insisting that dances such as ‘German’ are so intimate that they can only be proper when the company is well known.” All these strict social customs and conventions were clear to those who were born into the high society. However, there was an urgent need to explain the rules to the newcomers; therefore Mrs. Sherwood’s guide gained its popularity mainly among the newly rich mothers and their marriageable daughters. (Waid, 2002e, 312)

Manners for the Metropolis can serve as another example of such manual. Written by Francis Crowninshield and published in 1910, this helpful guidebook attempted to advise young successful men on etiquette, such as the proper use of cutlery. Candace Waid explains that Crowninshield’s book aimed to attract different readers than Mrs. Sherwood’s manual. Indeed, the former wrote primarily for “socially climbing men who start out as dance partners in search of advice of for getting invited to fine dinners and avoiding boring or unattractive women”. While one of the manuals described above regards the appropriate behaviour in the ballroom and is aimed at women, and the other book is concerned mainly with the dining manners with its aim at ambitious men, both the books “are concerned with the more hierarchically informed and formal place setting to be finalized at the altar”. (Waid, 2002e, 312)

3.3 Upper-class woman in the society

Edith Wharton named her highly acclaimed novel *The Age of Innocence* for she felt an age of innocence was the most suitable way to describe the life in New York of the late 19th century (the novel was published in 1920 but the plot is set mainly in 1870s New York). By using this term, she intended to describe the world of a young lady (debutante) whose most important purpose in life should be to make a suitable marriage. The young ladies of upper society were constantly reminded of this by the elders. From an early age, they were supplied with elegant clothes and taught how to act at high society events. All this was happening for one particular reason – to make the girl marriageable and highly-valued on the marriage market. However, as R. W. B. Lewis mentions in his *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, these girls, as well as young Edith Wharton (born Jones), were never told what is the true essence of a relationship between a man and a woman:

It was not her mother's function, Edith Jones had to learn, to supply any hints about the real relationship between married men and women. About all that, the maternal contribution was an elaborate pattern of mystification, something which the mature Edith Wharton regarded with rancorous regret. (Lewis, 261)

Also, as Lewis reminds, it was not considered appropriate for any young lady from the best society to act without her mother's permission. Making independent decisions, such as accepting invitations from gentlemen, was strictly forbidden unless the girl asked her mother first. Edith herself was a great example of how young ladies were treated by the exclusive and excluded society in the age of innocence. It was a few days before her first wedding with Edward Robbins Wharton when she asked her mother "what marriage was really like". Her mother was stunned by such daring and inappropriate question and replied that she never heard such a ridiculous question. She was literally disgusted by her daughter making such an embarrassing enquiry when she added:

You've seen enough pictures and statues in your life. Haven't you noticed that men are...made differently from women?... Then for heaven's sake don't ask me anymore silly questions. You can't be as stupid as you pretend. (Lewis, 272)

Edith was 24 years old when she got married and she still did not know where babies came from. Due to the lack of any sexual education, it is understandable why Wharton felt that this

prudent and rigid parental treatment of young women like herself with regard to sex was responsible for their future unsatisfactory marriage life. (Lewis, 272)

As Wharton suggests in *The Age of Innocence*, female sexual experience at her time was considered foreign and inappropriate. The 1970s was an era favoring innocent and naïve women which is also reflected in Wharton's novel. May Welland, the main protagonist, represents a blonde and infantile young lady who follows and obeys all of society's customs. She is shallow, uninteresting and perfectly fits into New York society. Her cousin Ellen Olenska, on the other hand, is more mature. It's her free spirit which makes her hated by the strict New York society with its rigid code of social customs and behavior. It comes as no surprise that a desired man, represented here by Newland Archer, eventually prefers the child-woman to the experienced woman of the world (innocence and female purity wins over experience). As Candace Waid comments:

If Ellen Olenska must be driven out of New York society, Newland and May remain to sacrifice their lives to the orderly world of family and tradition that forms the matrix of the insular and (as the novel already knows) doomed society of Old New York. (Waid, 2002d, 20)

The topic of Ellen Olenska vs. May Welland in *The Age of Innocence* is discussed further in this paper, in the chapter 4.4.

Similarly, the unfortunate life of the main protagonist of *The House of Mirth*, Lily, which eventually results in her death, also reflects the way women were treated in the late 19th century New York. As Sherrill Cheda and Deborah Esch claim in their *article New essays on the House of Mirth*, "Lily Bart was nothing if not a victim of the social conventions of her time, which punished innocent women on the basis of their reputation while allowing men total freedom". (Cheda and Esch, 2001)

Wharton's Lily spent her short life rebelling against the rigid social convention of the necessity of marrying a wealthy man from the best society despite having deep feelings for him – she despised the patriarchal society of New York. Moreover, she was also involved in gambling, often appeared in the society wearing shockingly revealing dress, smoked great amount of cigarettes and even visited Selden's bachelor apartment on her own. Therefore,

according to some critics, she embodied a “New Woman”. However, as Nancy Von Rosk observes, “Lily herself believes that she embodies the Victorian ideal of true womanhood...”. (Von Rosk, 2001) She thinks of her beauty as “a power for good”. Nevertheless, she is less aware of the fact that she must display her beauty as a commodity on a marriage market in order to attract the most prosperous buyer.

Von Rosk further explains that women’s presence in public during the late 19th century was associated with anxiety for many people feared the effects of the urban culture, such as women’s possible contact with undesirables. However, as Von Rosk reminds, “by mid-century her [woman’s] presence in public space would be encouraged. Ladies would help keep the city orderly and refined”. (Von Rosk, 2001) Furthermore, the opening of the first department stores in the city, with their main focus on female population, also contributed to the process of feminizing the public spaces. By the end of the century, “there was clearly a shift into a more visual consumer culture”. The images of women had a great influence and were therefore misused to attract new consumers and to sell products. The New Woman “is also increasingly objectified” and soon “becomes either a commodity or a representation of cultural ideals”. (Von Rosk, 2001)

Towards the end of the 19th century, it was the cultural work of women which was dominating the public scene, a fact also apparent in *The House of Mirth*. The wives of wealthy and successful businessmen suddenly became powerful figures and “could achieve self-importance through society”. (Von Rosk, 2001) Von Rosk also quotes Valerie Steele who claims that in the late 19th century, beauty became more important than self-control. Steele says that “rather than the inner spiritual beauty that so many Victorian writers had praised, fashion and beauty writers increasingly stressed the erotic elements of feminine beauty”. (Von Rosk, 2001)

3.4 New York vs. Paris conventions

In her novels, Wharton successfully depicted the stiff conventions which controlled the behaviour of the upper classes living in New York. Furthermore, the author also focused on what she considered as significant differences between the social customs ruling the elite

classes in New York and Paris. For Wharton herself moved to Paris after the divorce with her first husband, she knew a great deal about the manners in the French capital and could therefore describe her newly gained knowledge in her novels, such as *The Custom of the Country*.

Towards the end of the novel, the main protagonist Undine marries Raymond de Chelles, a French count. However, she soon comes into realization that she is not content with the life in France with all its traditional customs. For instance, Undine struggles with the social inhibitions strictly controlling which people she is allowed to invite to her party to avoid insulting others. Indeed, as she observes, “the whole French life seemed to depend on the exact interpretation of” the word “relations”. (Wharton, 1941b, 538)

Similarly, Wharton describes Undine’s surprise on discovering her mother-in-law’s influence on her husband. Raymond de Chelles believes that “a man should respect his mother’s wishes and see to it that his household respected them”. (Wharton, 1941b, 518) According to Undine’s husband, a man should at all times obey and honour his mother, despite having different beliefs inside. Wharton also reminds that “all Frenchmen of his class appeared to share his view”. (Wharton, 1941b, 518) On the other hand, regarding the relationships between a mother and her son, New York upper-class society was less rigid.

Moreover, when having an argument with her husband, Undine is blamed by Raymond for ignoring French traditions and coming from the country where people are proud of changing. Raymond then observes that all Americans coming to Paris are the same. He says they come to Europe and forget about their home country as soon as they arrive to Paris. He then also mentions that people coming from New York to settle in Paris are able to speak the language of their new country, however, they lack the ability to understand what the French mean. Raymond also blames the Americans for desiring the same things as they do without knowing why the French want them. He then concludes:

You come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the street haven’t had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they’re dry... (Wharton, 1941b, 545)

Indeed, Undine's husband implies that the Americans do not appreciate their traditions, if they have any. He also admits that the French often falsely conclude that as soon as the Americans copy the French ways and pick up French slang, they can "understand anything about the things that make life decent and honorable" for the French. (Wharton, 1941b, 545)

After her divorce in 1913, Edith Wharton realized that the stiff New York society would never accept a divorced woman. For this reason, she moved to Paris and France became her permanent home. Indeed, she returned to her country of origin only once more in her lifetime – in 1923 – in order to accept an honorary degree from Yale University. (Wagner-Martin, 8) Linda Wagner-Martin explains that it was "the freedom to be herself in a country that respected intellect and yet allowed even the famous to have a private life" which Wharton adored about the European country. (Wagner-Martin, 17) The author also admired the fact that in France "one could truly exist as a self, an identity, a person – regardless of the way in which that person meshed, or perhaps failed to mesh, with society". (Wagner-Martin, 17) It was for these differences in the view of one's individuality which, according to Wharton, were too significant to conform to, that caused her to stay in France for the rest of her life.

4. LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS IN WHARTON'S NOVELS

4.1 Marriage

In her novels, Edith Wharton suggests that among the elite, marriage was perceived as a fundamental purchase transaction. Indeed, unmarriageable women and men without considerable means were eventually excluded from this exclusive society altogether. For women searching for a partner with substantial wealth, it was their beauty, not intelligence that mattered. Also, Lily, the main character from *The House of Mirth*, proves this fact. According to Nancy Von Rosk, as she describes Lily in her article *Spectacular homes and pastoral theaters: Gender, urbanity and domesticity in The House of Mirth*, "her beauty is really a commodity she must display on the marriage market in order to attract the best buyer". (Von Rosk, 2001) Wharton's Lily liked to think of her beauty as a power for good and as an instrument to gain her better position in society. Also, she was aware of the

advantages married life provided women with. Von Rosk explains the benefits of a married woman:

If married, she was granted more freedom than most women. She could break traditional rules without being branded as "fallen." She could divorce, smoke, have affairs with impunity because, as Lily says of Bertha Dorset, she has a "good backing". (Von Rosk, 2001)

William Modellmog also notes the privileges of marriage in his article *Disowning "Personality": Privacy and subjectivity in The House of Mirth*:

For women in the novel, being married constitutes a form of capital, not only by facilitating access to their husbands' bank accounts but also by shielding them from the uncertainties of reputation. Possessing a seal of domestic virtue that mere suspicions cannot undo, their status renders them as impervious to "talk" as to the vicissitudes of chance (the married women always seem to win at cards). (Moddelmog, 1998)

Indeed, Lily dreams of an ideal partner and a happy marriage. However, she also wants to maintain her independence and therefore, she turns down all the prosperous men proposing to her. She is convinced that she can always do better than the current situation offers her. She decides to wait patiently and lives alone in order to find a perfect relationship and pure love. Unfortunately, her brave decision has tragic consequences when she finds herself abandoned by her "friends", is forced to live among the working class, with hardly any money and then, in the end, dies alone. Tragically, if she agreed to marry one of the wealthy men of her society, instead of pushing the boundaries and dreaming of passionate love, she would live a happy, comfortable life, despite the fact that she would unlikely ever find love in that relationship.

In *The Age of Innocence*, Archer eventually marries May, a conventional woman who fits perfectly into his society, even though he is deeply in love with her cousin Ellen. He is willing to sacrifice passion and love for what he perceives to be his duty. Richard Grenier describes Archer's thoughts after his wife dies: "Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty". (Grenier, 1993)

Although, as mentioned above, married life provided women with some obvious advantages, conventional marriages of the late 19th century, regarding the upper classes, were sexless, lacking in passion and far from fulfilling. Therefore, there are also very few happy marriages in Wharton's fiction. Wharton herself went through a very unhappy marriage. Her first husband, Edward Robbins Wharton, suffered from severe depression and, except for coming from the same background, he had little in common with the author. As Allen Brooke puts it, he “was a man of limited intelligence and no artistic or intellectual interests”. (Brooke, 2007) As a result, Wharton divorced him in 1913.

As stated by Richard Grenier: “With Edith Wharton, love never conquers all. Society's moral conventions conquer all”. (Grenier, 1993) Indeed, her novels reflect that there was no place for pure, idealized love in the rigid society of the time. Instead, its members were expected to sacrifice their desires in order not to upset their narrow-mindedly thinking families.

4.2 Adultery

For the rigidity and close-mindedness of the New York elite society of the late 19th century, it is obvious that adultery and infidelity in relationships were hardly ever tolerated. Indeed, people involved in such shameless behaviour were condemned for it and often expelled from the high society with little or no chance of ever receiving an invitation to fancy dinners and other upper-class social events again.

Wharton herself, as Allen Brooke says in his article *Pursuit of Love in Edith Wharton*, printed in *The Weekly Standard*, had an affair. She was still married with Edward Robbins Wharton; however, this fact did not prevent her from having an affair with Morton Fullerton, a journalist for *The Times*. She felt deeply in love and “the affair lasted on and off for three years, but as he had demonstrated over many years to countless lovers and admirers of both sexes, he was deeply evasive, perhaps incapable of loving”, as Brooke observes. Therefore, the break-up was inevitable. Nevertheless, the author used her experience of being fully loved for the first time in her life to good effect – she attempted to express these feelings of passion in her books of that period. (Brooke, 2007)

However, despite her own experience with adultery, Wharton despises it in her novels, such as in *The Age of Innocence*. Newland Archer is in love with Ellen Olenska, despite already being married to May, Ellen's cousin. They love each other deeply and passionately, however, they decide not to see each other and live decent and respectable lives instead. Nevertheless, Archer later realizes that people from the high society, including his wife, believed for months that he and Ellen are lovers. Yet, they pretended not to know anything. Richard Grenier describes in his article *Society & Edith Wharton*:

It is Old New York's way of taking life without bloodshed: the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than "scenes" except the behavior of those who gave rise to them. (Grenier, 1993)

The theme of infidelity also appears in another of Wharton's novels, *The House of Mirth*. After her arrival from Europe, where she accompanied the Dorsets, Lily finds herself in the centre of everyone's attention for she is accused of adultery. She is publicly humiliated by the false stories and feels there is very little she can do to win her good reputation back:

...all the actors and witnesses in the miserable drama had preceded her with their version of the case; and, even had she seen the least chance of gaining a hearing for her own, some obscure disdain and reluctance would have restrained her. She knew it was not by explanations and counter-charges that she could ever hope to recover her lost standing... (Wharton, 1933c, 227)

Lily is fully aware of the fact that "the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks". (Wharton, 1933c, 226) Similarly, even Rosedale, who wanted to marry Lily at the beginning, was forced to change his mind and despite still being in love with her, he now refuses to express his feelings as he cannot afford to lose his good reputation. He states: "I don't believe the stories about you – I don't want to believe them. But they're there, and my not believing them ain't going to alter the situation". (Wharton, 1933c, 255) Lily responds to this, asking whether the fact that the stories are not true alters the situation. To this, Rosedale replies: "I believe it does in novels; but I'm certain it don't in real life". (Wharton, 1933c, 256)

As can be seen from the examples above, it was very important for the members of the elite to maintain their good reputation at all times. Once a person was talked about and accused of infidelity, even though there was clearly no evidence to prove the accusations, it was very unlikely for them to gain their respectability and place in the unforgiving society back.

4.3 Divorce

Similarly to their relationship to adultery, the high New York society condemned divorce resolutely. Indeed, divorce was allowed only for adultery among the elite. However, even in these cases a divorced man or woman often lost their place in society and were talked about at dinner parties and other popular social events where they were no longer among regular guests for the hostess feared of losing her reputation if she had invited “the divorced”. As Candace Waid mentions in her article *Changing Mores in New York*, the divorce rates rose significantly in New York of the 1870s and early 1880s and “the New York courts could not control the laws of bordering states that allowed remarriage without regard to whether adultery had been committed”. (Waid, 2002c, 343) Some of the new inventions of the time, such as cars and telephones, were often blamed for the increase in failed marriages. These inventions were seen as instruments of corruption, with cars even called “the devil’s wagon”. (Waid, 2002c, 343)

Wharton used the theme of divorce in all the novels discussed in this paper. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily is invited to travel across Europe with the Dorsets. However, she is too excited about her trip and generosity of her hosts that she struggles to realize the true motive of the invitation. Mr. Dorset plans to divorce his wife and he realizes that the only accepted way of doing so can be by being accused of adultery. Therefore, during their trip, he makes all the efforts to provoke his wife by being seen with young and beautiful Lily. After their arrival from Europe, Mrs. Dorset accuses Lily of having an affair with her husband, even though she knows Lily is innocent.

Another novel, *The Custom of the Country*, is literally pervaded with divorce. The main protagonist, Undine, gets divorced three times and in the end, she marries a man who was also her first husband. The novel ends with Undine imagining what it would be like to be an Ambassador's wife which is a position she could never obtain due to her numerous divorces.

The public opinion on divorce in New York of the late 19th century is also reflected in the words of Undine's second mother-in-law:

I believe in certain parts of the country such – unfortunate arrangements – are beginning to be tolerated. But in New York, In spite of our growing indifference, a divorced woman is still - thank heaven! - at a decided disadvantage. (Wharton, 1941b, 95)

Finally, in *The Age of Innocence*, it is May's cousin Ellen Olenska who returns from Europe and plans to get divorced from her husband, Polish Count Olenski, a European nobleman. Because Ellen was abused by him and he also stole her fortune as well as had affairs with other women, she decides to escape his cruelty and returns to her family in New York. She is in love with Archer whom she asks for a legal advice about her planning divorce. Despite his feelings for Ellen, Archer succeeds in persuading her not to get divorced in order to save her reputation - it would certainly not be acceptable in high society and its members are already terrified of scandal - respectable women in that age, of that class, did not divorce.

The author herself got divorced with her first husband, Edward Robbins Wharton. According to Allen Brooke, "Wharton abhorred divorce and lampooned American divorcées in her fiction, but she knew there could be no alternative in her own case, and the marriage was dissolved in 1913". (Brooke, 2007) She subsequently left America and moved to Paris where, unlike in the United States, the mores were not excessively strict.

4.4 Ellen Olenska vs. May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*

The two female characters from *The Age of Innocence*, Countess Ellen Olenska and May Welland, can serve as a perfect example of the traditional conventions of the era and the importance of sacrificing sexual desires to a family duty.

In the novel, Newland Archer, despite planning to get married, falls deeply in love with the extravagant Countess Olenska. Both Archer and Ellen come from the same background which is the old, traditional New York. However, Ellen got married to Polish Count Olenski and therefore had a chance to spend several years living in modern Europe. After her arrival back to her family in New York, she has difficulties adapting to the rigid social conventions of the

upper society. For instance, she dare wear overly eccentric and daring clothes at the opera, attracting too much attention of the audience. This behaviour, even though unconscious, was certainly considered unacceptable among the elite. Indeed, as Carmen Trammell Skaggs cites Maureen E. Montgomery:

While social conventions prevented women from engaging in public affairs, the rules of the private drawing room prevailed in the opera box and public ballroom, thereby privatizing public space and making it a respectable place for women of the social elite to be seen. (Skaggs, 2004)

As Skaggs explains further: “only those women who occupied a clearly defined role within the elite’s conventional system could afford to participate in the spectacle of display”. (Skaggs, 2004) Due to her unconventional and inappropriate behaviour, Ellen is despised by the other members of the high society and remains outside this inner circle. Moreover, she soon becomes a common object of gossiping and feels the intensity of people’s gaze.

Similarly, Archer’s astonishment after receiving Ellen’s frank invitation into her apartment also represents the stir her arrival caused in the traditional society. Moreover, Archer is even more stunned as he subsequently arrives to her apartment where Ellen “receives him informally in an unconventionally decorated sitting room and speaks to him in an unaffected, straightforward manner he has never before encountered in a lady”. (Grenier, 1993) Clearly, Ellen’s unorthodox behaviour collides even with her lover who represents the Old New York.

To conclude, Skaggs summarizes Ellen’s controversial character by writing that she “embodies the passion, freedom, and imagination that remain suppressed in the conventions of the upper classes”. (Skaggs, 2004)

While Ellen Olenska represents a modern, free-spirited woman, May Welland is perceived as an innocent, obedient young woman who follows the rules of society, therefore making a perfect wife. Wharton makes an effort to emphasize May’s gentility and incapability to think on her own. However, despite being too naïve at times, Ellen is brisk enough to discover Archer’s feelings for Ellen and informs Countess of being pregnant with Archer’s child. Her plan, which later appears to be successful, is to persuade Ellen to return back to Europe.

According to Richard Grenier:

Countess Olenska seems to stand for everything Archer has always wanted from life but never gotten: freedom from his restrictive social world, the wild and intoxicating life of far-off lands, love. (Grenier, 1993)

Indeed, even after his wedding, Archer prefers to spend time in his wife's cousin's company. It is Ellen, who opens his eyes to the stifling New York society and makes him feel free, unlike his wife whose traditional views of their social roles make Archer feel uneasy. However, as his character represents the Old New York with all its rigid conventions, he chooses to sacrifice his desires and does his duty by being loyal to his wife, whom he finds dull but who is at the same time accepted by his society.

5. LEISURE TIME OF THE UPPER CLASSES

The means of spending leisure time were undergoing a great change in the second half of the 19th century. It was a time of division into social classes according to people's ideas of pleasure and the way they spent it. This fact became evident when certain venues in the city were operated for working classes only, while others opened merely for the elite. These places were not defined by their clientele only, but also by their location and admission.

One of the most popular ways of spending leisure time was to attend a traveling show called "Living Wax-Works". According to Waid, they "used human actors who pretended to be wax-automatons that were being wound into jerky motions as their supposed internal mechanisms were tightened". (Waid, 2002c, 341) Furthermore, Charles McGrath suggests in his article *Edith Wharton's New York* that horse show and the opera were among the main cultural attractions of the time. Also, certain society painters were fashionable, such as Claud Popple in *The Custom of the Country*. As McGrath continues:

The Metropolitan Museum, on the other hand, is a "queer wilderness of cast iron and encaustic tiles," so seldom visited that Newland Archer and Madame Olenska go there when they want to have a secret rendezvous. There are books – private libraries, in fact – but no one seems to read them much. (McGrath, 2004)

Also, playing bridge, a popular card game of the late 19th century, became almost a necessity for women of high society. Unfortunately, this gambling game caused a great deal of

difficulties for some women by burdening them with heavy debts. Such example can be found in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* where Lily, the main protagonist, is persuaded to play the game of bridge with her friends. However, she struggles to realize that she cannot afford to lose money and as a result, she is subsequently publicly humiliated by the unforgiving society for her gambling experience. As Lily explains to Mrs. Peniston in the novel:

The fact is, I've played cards a good deal - bridge; the women all do it; girls too - it's expected. Sometimes I've won - won a good deal - but lately I've been unlucky - and of course such debts can't be paid off gradually. (Wharton, 1933c, 172)

Another way how to entertain the elite New Yorkers was the business of selling flowers and also floral dictionaries. It was mainly men who used flowers to help them convey the unspeakable - such as expressing their deep feelings for a woman without having to be too direct. It was not only the type of flower chosen, but also their colour, scent and arrangement that mattered. Newland Archer from *The Age of Innocence* is an example of a gentleman using these floral messages regularly - every day, he gives a gift of lilies-of-the-valley to May Welland. These white flowers represent purity and "return of happiness" which makes them a perfect gift for innocent May. Nevertheless, she is not the only woman receiving flowers from Newland as Countess Olenska is also presented with a romantic bouquet. This time, however, the roses are sent anonymously and are all yellow (yellow roses mean "jealousy", infidelity" and "adultery" according to some floral lexicons). It is unclear, though, what Archer intended by opting for these flowers - whether he was asking Ellen to be unfaithful or whether the yellow roses represented cheating on his part. (Waid, 2002c, 342)

5.1 The opera

According to Angus Paul, as he quotes an American-studies scholar Bruce A. Conachie,: "In the second quarter of the 19th century, wealthy New Yorkers developed rituals of operagoing that helped solidify the city's upper class". (Paul, 1988) At that time, many people from different backgrounds became rich through their prosperous businesses which inevitably resulted in a fragmentation of the upper class. Paul explains further:

"New York's elite reacted to that uncertainty by ritualizing attendance at operas - encouraging theatres designed specifically for such works , charging prices generally out

of reach for the middle and lower classes, requiring formal dress, and refining rules for responding to and discussing performances.” (Paul, 1988)

The opera marked opening of the winter season for the elite. (Montgomery, 19) It used to play an important role in the society for those attending the opera regularly were accepted as members of the very exclusive society for whom such social events provided a great opportunity to display their wealth. In the late 1970s, a new opera house was built in New York which divided the upper class into those who decided to stay loyal to the old Academy (mainly the conservatives who cherished the building for being small and who made all the efforts to keep the “new people” out) and those who preferred to attend the new Metropolitan Opera House. The amount of box seats was only limited and, since there was still a huge demand for them, it was considered a privilege, which only members of the inner circle could afford, to own a seat in the opera box.

The opera allowed the elite members of New York society to display their wealth and status in public. Even the “journalists’ reports so concentrated on the details of the audience that they sometimes failed to even mention the name of the opera being performed”. (Montgomery, 135) Women attending the opera were aware of the fact that they had a chance to demonstrate their wealth and status by the choice of their evening dresses and jewels. The main purpose of attending the opera was to present themselves to New York society.

The theme of opera going appears regularly in some of Wharton’s novels, such as *The Custom of the Country* (where Undine Spragg, a young social climber, is aware that owning a box seat at the opera house allows her to be a part of the exclusive society) or *The Age of Innocence*. The latter opens with a scene at the opera and the author also placed several key scenes into the opera boxes. According to Montgomery, it was a custom in the late 19th century New York for young debutantes such as May Welland to “attend the opera before going on to private balls. The opera was thereby incorporated into the rituals of the marriage market and the process that reproduced class”. (Montgomery, 31) This also worked for Newland Archer and May Welland sitting in a box with her mother and aunt. As Dizikes says, “the opera house was a marriage market, where young men and women met under the eyes of their elders”. (Dizikes, 286) It was common for men at the opera to openly gaze upon women in the boxes and Wharton’s Newland Archer is a perfect example of such convention when he observes the audience “in order to view his intended”. (Wharton, 1995a, 5) Women, however,

could not afford to display such bold behaviour in public and were expected to be fully absorbed in the play and concentrate on the happening on the stage only. Wharton proves this fact by describing May's "absorbed young face" (Wharton, 1995a, 6) and "eyes ecstatically fixed on the stage-lovers". (Wharton, 1995a, 5)

Another reason why attending the opera became so popular among the upper classes was their desire to experience passion and imagination through the actors on the stage. Since it was considered inappropriate and against the strict social conventions to express one's emotions, the members of the upper classes attended the opera also for a deep desire to participate in the display of passion and emotion, even though this was done only by watching the actors.

Also, it was not considered elegant and upper-class-like to arrive early at the opera. Newland Archer, aware of this convention, arrives at the climax of the performance of Faust. Further in the novel, at Newland and May's wedding, Archer suddenly recalls the opening night at the opera. He is surrounded by the same artifice of convention and display of wealth which reminds him vividly of one night at the opera house.

It is in the late 19th century when the New York society is undergoing a significant change and so is the opera with dresses being more extravagant, yet now tolerated as appropriate.

The opera season made an important part of New York's social life. An appearance at the opera was used to secure the position inside the elite inner circle. It was a symbol of stability and predictability in the world of the upper classes.

5.2 Balls

In the late 19th century New York, balls were undoubtedly one of the most anticipated and popular social events in the calendar. However, such events required both the guests and the hosts to follow a set of strict social rules and codes. For instance, when writing an invitation, a hostess should not have used the word "ball" on the cards. Also, she should not have mentioned the purpose of the party. (Sherwood, 320) The ball invitations were always expressed in the third person and had to be sent out at least seven to ten days before the event

took place. It was polite to reply to such invitation within seven days from receiving it in order to inform the hostess of the number of guests arriving. Richard Wells comments on the crowd: "Any number over a hundred guests constitutes a large ball; under fifty it is merely a dance". (Wells, 1893) Moreover, for dancing was the main purpose of every ball, it was important for a hostess to pay attention to the choice of the guests and their dancing abilities.

To follow the conventions of the time, it was not recommended to arrive exactly on time but at least an hour later. Married ladies were accompanied by their husbands while the unmarried ones arrived with their mothers or with an escort. According to Wells:

A lady cannot refuse the invitation of a gentleman to dance, unless she has already accepted that of another, for she would be guilty of an incivility which might occasion trouble; she would, moreover, seem to show contempt for him whom she refused, and would expose herself to receive in secret an ill compliment from the mistress of the house. (Wells, 1893)

Among the general rules followed by those attending balls was for instance a custom prohibiting ladies from crossing a ball-room unattended. No gentleman should have been sitting next to a lady who was a stranger to him. Moreover, even if she was his acquaintance, he could do so with her permission only. Wells further describes the social codes of behaviour:

Any presentation to a lady in a public ball-room, for the mere purpose of dancing, does not entitle you to claim her acquaintance afterwards; therefore, should you meet her, at most you may lift your hat; but even that is better avoided - unless, indeed, she first bow - as neither she nor her friends can know who or what you are. (Wells, 1893)

When a lady refused to dance with a gentleman, she had to make a polite excuse and gave him a reason for having done so. In case a gentleman saw the lady who had declined his offer earlier dancing with someone else, he should not have taken an offence nor felt hurt. When inviting a lady to dance, it was a custom to say: "Will you honor me with your hand for a quadrille?" or, "Shall I have the honor of dancing this set with you?" The master of the house was in charge of watching the ladies dancing and asking gentlemen to dance with those who had not been dancing much. It was an honor and pleasure for any gentleman to be asked to do so. Ladies who danced much never boasted of it before others less fortunate. Instead, they

recommended gentlemen of their acquaintance to these women. To follow the etiquette precisely, women were advised not to talk too much during the night. Similarly, it was considered very rude to whisper in the ear of their partner. A set of stiff rules also applied to dancing:

In giving the hand for ladies chain or any other figures, those dancing should wear a smile, and accompany it with a polite inclination of the head, in the manner of a salutation. At the end of the dance, the gentleman reconducts the lady to her place, bows and thanks her for the honor which she has conferred. She also bows in silence, smiling with a gracious air. (Wells, 1893)

Provided the ball event was private, ladies were expected to show more reserve and to dance with all the gentlemen present. On no account was it polite to show a preference for one particular gentleman. When entering a private ball, the visitor was required to bow to the company. At such parties, a host sent round some refreshment of which all the guests tasted. Not to provide at least basic refreshments would have been considered the greatest impoliteness. (Wells, 1893)

After the ball event had finished, it was not considered appropriate for any married lady to leave the ball-room alone. She had to be accompanied by one or two other married ladies. Similar rule applied to young women – they always left the ball-room with their mother. Leaving the house had to be done discreetly in order not to disturb the master and mistress of the house. When a gentleman escorted a lady home from a ball, he should have never entered her house, even if she had invited him. In that case, he was advised to refuse politely. The gentleman would then call upon her during the next day or evening. Moreover, it was also customary for the guests to pay a visit to the hosts during the following week and express their pleasure of the enjoyable ball. (Wells, 1893)

5.3 Wharton's New York

In her novels, Edith Wharton describes the life in New York of the late 19th and early 20th century. If a reader, eager to know what the city looked like in this era, relied on her novels only, he or she would not get an objective idea of the place as the author writes mostly about life of the rich only. Therefore, as McGrath explains, “not a lot of real work gets done in

Wharton's New York". (McGrath, 2004) The truth is some of the young men, such as Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, are involved in what we can call legal careers. However, their dedication to work cannot be taken too seriously as they can still afford to take months off and travel to Europe or Newport. This is a world financed primarily by inherited wealth with salaries serving only as a secondary financial security. Also, in Wharton's New York, middle class and working class people are seldom seen and so are the servants. Moreover, in the novels discussed, Wharton rarely talks about immigrants and people of different colour. (McGrath, 2004)

The reason for the majority of her characters being members of the upper classes is that Wharton herself was a member of such elite circle. She was born into one of the richest families of Old New York. Her family belonged to a powerful New York clan who "set the tone and made the rules of society". (McGrath, 2004) As McGrath observes, the author's New York, as depicted in her novels, looked as follows:

On Wharton's map, civilization ends north of Central Park, except for satellites in Newport, Rhinebeck and Tuxedo Park. Her New York is very slender – it stretches from Third Avenue to Sixth, essentially, and its center is what is now the campus of New York University. If Steinberg had drawn Wharton's New York, he would have shown it from the point of view of someone looking through the Washington Square Arch. (McGrath, 2004)

Indeed, all the old aristocrats and other members of high society who appear in her writing (such as the Dagonets or the Van der Luydens) live in Washington Square and its neighborhood. They reside in opulent houses and their biggest fear is that of a scandal. However, the wealthy and successful careerists, such as Mr. Beaufort in *The Age of Innocence* or Mr. Trenor in *The House of Mirth* (his house even included a separate ballroom), often settle in the Fifth Avenue.

On the other hand, the fashionable young people, such as Lawrence Selden from *The House of Mirth* or Newland Archer with his new wife May from *The Age of Innocence*, choose the East Side to live in. The reasons for these people to own houses in this part of the city are reasonable enough – they are remote and a little experimental. Wharton describes Selden's street as full of "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”. (Wharton, 1933c, 6) His house is then described as a “flat-house with its marble porch and pseudo-Georgian façade”. (Wharton, 1933c, 6) After, Wharton depicts its interior by mentioning a hall with old painting on the walls, a small dark library with plenty of books, a Turkey rug, a littered desk, shabby leather chairs and muslin curtains. (Wharton, 1933c, 6)

Lastly, the poor residents of New York, as described in the works of Wharton, live in the West Side. This rather dirty and dangerous neighborhood is full of vulgar hotels and garbage in the streets. However, it is here where Madame Olenska lives briefly when she is visiting the city in *The Age of Innocence*. The general saying was that the further west you go from the Sixth Avenue, the poorer and uglier neighborhood surrounds you. This was also true for the unfortunate Lily Bart from *The House of Mirth* who ended up living in a boarding house, far from the wealthy upper class residents. (McGrath, 2004)

Sean Dennis Cashman claims in his book *America in the Gilded Age: from the death of Lincoln to the rise of Theodore Roosevelt* that all the major New York business institutions, such as the Stock Exchange or Merchants’ Exchange, where businessmen held their meetings and made transactions could have been found in the centre. (Cashman, 139) Cashman also reminds his readers that in 1867, New York was described in the *Evening Post* as the “most inconveniently arranged commercial city in the world”. Public transport in the city was too slow as it was run by two separate companies and “like railroads across the country, they clung to profitable routes and ignored certain districts which were left isolated”. (Cashman, 138)

In Candace Waid’s critical edition of *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton describes the buildings of the Fifth Avenue as she remembers them when she was a child and calls them “brownstone houses”. (Waid, 2002b, 234) She recalls these buildings were no more than three stories high and they all looked the same, making it easy for a dinner guest to enter a wrong house by mistake. Candace Waid adds that an average house had a drawing room beyond a vestibule. There were three layers of luxurious curtains, each made of a different material, covering the tall windows. A typical drawing room found in this type of house was decorated with pieces of modern Dutch marquetry. A cabinet with glazed doors, serving for display of pieces of art made of ivory or old lace, was almost an obligatory piece of furniture

in the room. (Waid, 2002b, 236) Wharton explains in her book *The Decoration of Houses* that in some modern American residents, “the drawing room is treated as a family apartment, and provided with books, lamps, easy-chairs and writing-tables”. However, in other houses, this room is still considered “the best room in the house”, with some people feeling that “no drawing room is worthy of the name unless it is uninhabitable”. Despite the fact that this room was rarely used (often only “for an hour after a ‘company’ dinner”, as Wharton observes), a great deal of money was spent on its decoration. (Wharton, 1902d, 124)

Commonly, the late 19th century interiors were dominated by floral patterns. Wharton comments: “The lives led behind the brownstone fronts were, with few exceptions, as monotonous as their architecture”. (Waid, 2002b, 241) In the late 19th century, it was very common to travel to Europe, spend a holiday there and arrive back with luggage full of works of art, such as lace, china, fine silver or even Venetian furniture. A collection of good books (old pieces which were well written and well printed for the older generations whose only leisure was reading) could be found in most of these brownstone houses’ libraries. (Waid, 2002b, 242)

Also, no grandiose house was complete without a pompous gala room, a room designed for entertaining purposes only. Wharton says that these gala rooms were never meant to serve for an informal or small assemblage which would fit comfortably in an ordinary living room of the house. Therefore, gala rooms were designed to be large and never overcrowded with furniture. Wharton further explains that the ceiling and the walls had to be the only parts of the crowded room that could be seen. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a great deal of thoughts and money was spent on its decoration in order to astonish the crowd. Wharton adds: “Nothing can be more cheerless than the state of a handful of people sitting after dinner in an immense ball room with gilded ceiling, bare floors, and a few pieces of monumental furniture ranged round the walls;...”. (Wharton, 1902d, 135) She adds that gala rooms were never meant to be seen by a guest except when crowded.

6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the research of this paper was to find evidence of the social conventions and habits of Edith Wharton's time in her novels. Moreover, the focus was also on the author's opinions on these rigid customs. The paper described the life and relationships of the upper-class people living in New York in the period of the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

In the second chapter, the life of Edith Wharton was briefly described. Also, this part dealt with the summaries of the novels researched in the paper, i.e. *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence*.

The third chapter described the rapidly changing economics and society during the Gilded Age, as well as the Progressive Era of the American history, taking place in 1865 until 1921. This chapter also dealt with the arrival of "new millionaires" in New York and the way these business people were commonly perceived by the traditional aristocracy. Afterwards, the life and struggles of a typical upper-class woman were discussed. Finally, the main differences between the conventions in New York and social customs in Paris, as perceived by Edith Wharton, were described.

The depiction of love and other relationships in Wharton's novels was the topic of the fourth chapter of the paper. First, the difference between the two female protagonists of *The Age of Innocence* was discussed. Subsequently, the importance of marriage, along with the public opinion on adultery and divorce among the upper classes, were explained.

Finally, the fifth chapter was concerned with the leisure time of the New York aristocracy, with the main focus on attending the opera and balls, including the set of rules controlling these events. Additionally, Wharton's New York, as depicted in her novels, as well as in her manual *The Decoration of Houses*, was described.

To conclude, Edith Wharton's novels were written as a profound critique of the upper-class system of New York at the turn of the century. She attempted to describe the emotionally repressive society with all its rigid customs often leading to tragic and unfulfilled lives. Also,

the author made an effort to stress the importance of money in such society and, considering she was born into the same aristocratic circle, she was smart enough to observe that the material world can never bring happiness to its members. Indeed, when Wharton wrote her novel *The Age of Innocence* (1920), she felt deeply humiliated by everything American. She despised the aristocracy for its narrow-mindedness and hypocrisy. Therefore, she moved to Paris, the city she loved, and continued to write about the old New York with its stiff conventions and urban wealth.

RESUMÉ

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá především kritickým postojem americké spisovatelky Edith Whartonové k otázce života a zkonstatěným konvencím newyorské aristokratické vrstvy. Práce je založena zejména na autorčině románech *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country* a *The Age of Innocence*. Dále bylo použito množství sekundární literatury, například Whartonové manuál interiérového designu *The Decoration of Houses* a kritické eseje odborníků na literaturu.

Edith Newboldová Jonesová (1862-1937), americká spisovatelka a autorka více než 40 různých knih – od románů a povídek, až po poezii a literaturu faktu – se narodila do rodiny patřící ke staré newyorské aristokracii. Když byly Edith 4 roky, odstěhovala se i s rodinou do Evropy, kde strávili 5 let cestováním po starém kontinentě. Edith se již od útlého věku zajímala o literaturu a svůj volný čas nejraději trávila v knihovně svého otce. Její první literární pokusy zahrnovaly především povídky a poezii. Protože však pocházela z vážené a bohaté aristokratické rodiny, kde bylo naprosto nepřijatelné vychovat mladou dámu, aby svůj život později zasvětila psaní románů, byla Edith od literatury odrazována. Hlavním cílem mladých aristokratických žen bylo vdát se za muže ze stejně vysoké vrstvy, proto trávily svůj čas navštěvováním plesů a jiných společenských událostí a zajímaly se především o etiku a módu.

Poté, co se rodina Jonesových vrátila zpět do New Yorku, mladá Edith, jak bylo zvykem ve vyšších vrstvách, se poprvé objevila ve společnosti jako debutantka. V roce 1885 se provdala za o 12 let staršího bankéře Edwarda Robbinse Whartona, přezdívaného “Teddy“. Avšak, kromě stejné sociální vrstvy pár neměl mnoho společného a Edward mladé Edith intelektuálně nestačil. Brzy se u něj rozvinula bipolární porucha osobnosti, kterou zdědil po svém otci. Protože Edith vedla po svatbě sexuálně poměrně neuspokojivý život, brzy si našla milence, kterým se stal Morton Fullerton, novinář píšící pro *The Times*. Tato aféra ovšem neměla dlouhé trvání, jelikož Fullerton vztah nebral příliš vážně. Spisovatelku však tato zkušenost velmi obohatila, což se odrazilo v jejích úspěšných dílech, kde barvitě popisuje vášeň, kterou měla možnost poznat až právě díky vztahu s Fullertonem. V roce 1913 se Whartonové rozpadá 30leté manželství a dochází k rozvodu. Autorka se hned na to odstěhuje

do Paříže, a Evropa se stává jejím permanentním domovem. Mezi její nejbližší přátele patří například spisovatel Henry James, kterého často navštěvuje v Londýně a který zcela nepochybně ovlivnil její vlastní tvorbu. Během první světové války se Whartonová věnuje charitativní činnosti a cestování. Do své rodné země se vrací už pouze jednou, a to roku 1923, za účelem převzetí čestného doktorátu Univerzity v Yale.

Autorčin styl se vyznačuje vtipnou ironií, satirou a nostalgií, se kterou věrně popisuje tradiční americkou společnost. Mezi autorčiny nejvýznamnější romány, kromě těch zkoumaných v této práci, patří například *Sanctuary* (1903), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *Summer* (1917), *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), *Twilight Sleep* (1927) a *The Children* (1928). Whartonová však psala také povídky, jako *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (1910), *Xingu and Other Stories* (1916) nebo *Old New York* (1924) a literaturu faktu, kam se řadí například *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), *In Morocco* (1920) a její vlastní autobiografie *A Backward Glance* (1934).

Edith Whartonová umírá roku 1937 ve Francii, dodnes se však řadí mezi nejvýznamnější americké spisovatelky a její romány slouží jako věrný obraz americké vyšší společnosti konce 19. a začátku 20. století.

Tato práce se zabývá především obrazem tradičních společenských konvencí, které ovládaly životy aristokratických vrstev žijících v New Yorku na přelomu 19. a 20. století, ve vybraných románech Edith Whartonové. Děje těchto románů jsou zasazeny do doby tzv. Zlatého věku amerických dějin, pro nějž je charakteristický rychlý ekonomický růst a vznik rapidně expandující industriální ekonomiky ve Spojených Státech. V tomto prosperujícím období byla například zavedena sériová výroba na běžících pásech, docházelo k četné monopolizaci výroby a vznikla zde největší železniční síť světa. Po skončení občanské války se USA dokonce staly hospodářsky nejsilnější zemí světa. Prosperita a rozmach akciových společností přivedly do New Yorku mnoho obchodníků, kteří se do města stěhovali za účelem výhodných obchodních transakcí. Tito lidé, tzv. "noví milionáři", to ovšem ve vybrané newyorské společnosti neměli snadné – členové tradiční aristokracie jimi často pohrdali a cítili se ohroženi jejich nově nabytým bohatstvím a vlivem. Příkladem takového úspěšného podnikatele je pan Beaufort z *The Age of Innocence*, který je členy elitní společnosti považován za muže poněkud pochybného charakteru, s kterým není radno se veřejně stýkat.

Třetí kapitola této práce se také zabývá postavením ženy ve vyšší společnosti na konci 19. století. Podle Edith Whartonové bylo hlavním smyslem života mladých dam newyorské vrchní třídy co nejvýhodněji se provdat za muže, který by je zaopatřil a upevnil by tak jejich místo ve společnosti. Proto se mladé dívky už od útlého věku učily eleganci, tanci a společenským mravům, čímž se později zvyšovala jejich hodnota na “manželském trhu“, tedy šance na výhodný sňatek. Tyto nevinné dívky však postrádaly základní znalosti o tom, v čem tkví podstata manželství. Tento fakt měl tragické následky i pro Whartonovou, jejíž manželství ztroskotalo mimo jiné kvůli nedostatku informací týkajících se rozdílu mezi mužem a ženou. Tato témata byla považována za trapná a nevhodná konverzace.

Čtvrtá kapitola práce pojednává o mezilidských vztazích ve Whartonové románech. Autorka často naznačuje, že mezi horní společenskou vrstvou fungovalo manželství jako kupní transakce, což znamená, že muži i ženy s nedostatečnými finančními prostředky byli nakonec z této exkluzivní společnosti vyloučeni. Autorčina postava Lily z *The House of Mirth* je příkladem mladé ženy, pro kterou je hlavním nástrojem její krása, nikoli inteligence. Lily touží po sňatku, razantně však odmítá všechny nápadníky s přesvědčením, že jí nejsou hodni. Nutnost výhodného sňatku potvrzuje také fakt, že vdané ženy mohly těžit z četných výhod, které jim manželství nabízelo, například více svobody, možnost kouřit nebo porušovat všeobecná pravidla, aniž by byla žena považována za mravně hříšnou.

Tato kapitola se dále zabývá názorem společnosti na nevěru. Pro svůj tradiční a úzkoprsý pohled na svět se i na nevěru aristokratická společnost dívala s opovržením a člověk, o kterém se proslýchalo, že byl zapleten do takového milostného trojúhelníku, byl zpravidla vyčleněn ze společnosti. Sama Whartonová prožila jako již vdaná žena milostnou aféru, avšak ve svých románech nevěrou pohrdá. Podobně jako nebylo tolerováno cizoložství, vyšší společnost neměla pochopení ani pro rozvod, který byl možný pouze v případě nevěry. Avšak i v tomto případě ztratili následně jedinci, kteří podstoupili rozvod, své jinak pevné místo ve vysoké společnosti a přestali být zváni na společenské akce, protože by mohli pošpinit dobré jméno hostitele.

V páté kapitole je rozebírán způsob, jakým trávila newyorská aristokratická vrstva svůj volný čas, který prošel na konci 19. století velkou změnou. Lidé se řadili do jednotlivých sociálních

tříd mino jiné i podle toho, jak nejčastěji trávili svůj volný čas. Tato skutečnost se projevila tím, že většina podniků v New Yorku sloužila pouze pro pracující třídu, zatímco jiné se pyšnily pouze aristokratickou klientelou. Mezi nejoblíbenější zábavu bohatých New Yorčanů bezesporu patřily návštěvy opery, které každoročně zahajovaly začátek zimní sezony. Pravidelná návštěva opery hrála ve vyšší společnosti velmi důležitou roli proto, že tato představení dávala lidem možnost veřejně ukázat jejich bohatství a s ním i sociální status – ti, kdo pravidelně navštěvovali operu, zpravidla patřili mezi exkluzivní newyorskou společnost. Pro mladé debutantky, jako například May Welland z *The Age of Innocence*, bylo zvykem nejprve navštívit operní představení a až poté se zúčastnit soukromého plesu, kde bude mladá dáma veřejně uvedena do společnosti.

Právě návštěva plesů pařila mezi další oblíbené činnosti newyorských horních vrstev. Tato událost nicméně vyžadovala pečlivou přípravu a dodržování přísných pravidel jak ze strany hostitelů, tak hostů. Pozvánky musely být odeslány alespoň 7 dnů před onou událostí. Nedoporučovalo se dostavit se na ples přesně v dobu jeho zahájení, avšak alespoň o hodinu později. Vdané dámy přišly v doprovodu svých manželů, zatímco svobodné ženy doprovázely jejich matky, popřípadě jiný doprovod. Mezi další pravidla patřil například striktní zákaz dam přejít taneční sál bez doprovodu. Muži si zásadně nesedali vedle dámy, již neznali, a i pokud byla jejich známá, mohli tak učinit pouze s jejím svolením. Po skončení plesu bylo považováno za nevhodné, pokud vdaná žena odešla ze sálu sama – musela být doprovázena jinou vdanou ženou. Podobné pravidlo se týkalo i mladých dam, které zpravidla opouštěly sál po boku své matky.

Edith Whartonová se ve svých románech pokusila věrně zobrazit životy vyšší společnosti v New Yorku koncem 19. a začátku 20. století, tedy za jejího života. Ve svých dílech často s ironií kritizovala povrchní americkou společnost, která byla motivována především majetkem, a její přísná pravidla. Díky svému nejúspěšnějšímu románu *The Age of Innocence* (1920) se stala první ženou, která obdržela Pulitzerovu cenu za literaturu a pro své pokrokové názory a vtipnou ironii je Edith Whartonová dodnes považována za jednu z nejvýznamnějších amerických autorek.

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APPENDIX

The photograph of Edith Wharton



Source: <http://madameguillotine.org.uk/2011/01/24/edith-wharton-born-on-24th-january-1862/>

