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# A “Disastrous Union”: The Entrapment of the “Larger” Nature by the “Meaner” Nature in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Custom of the Country*, & *The Age of Innocence*

Casey C. Kramer  
*Gettysburg College*

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## **Abstract**

Blake Nevius identifies a governing theme in Edith Wharton’s fiction, there is a “larger nature . . . trapped by circumstances ironically of its own devising into consanguinity with a meaner nature . . . There is no accounting for such disastrous unions except as a result of the generous but misguided impulses of the larger nature” (9-10). I will explore this “disastrous union” between the “larger” and “meaner” natures in four Wharton novels: *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*. By “larger” nature, I will mean characters who are magnanimous, thoughtful, and self-sacrificing. With “meaner” nature, I will refer to characters who are ambitious, manipulative, selfish, and conventional. The majority of Wharton’s’ novels focus on the upper class in New York high society; *Ethan Frome*, which takes place in rural New England, is the only exception. In most cases, the females exhibit characteristics of the meaner nature, while men are examples of the larger nature. With each novel in this selection, Wharton presents a distinct illustration of the larger and meaner natures. Both the constant and evolving qualities of these “larger” and “meaner” characters will reveal Wharton’s evolving perception of the “disastrous union.”

## **Keywords**

Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, *The Age of Innocence*, Larger Nature, Meaner Nature

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Nature in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*,  
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Casey Kramer ‘14

Advised by Professor Robert Garnett

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## I. Introduction

*“Critics agree that she was too well bred, too narrow in her social outlook, too chillingly rational in her treatment of experience . . .”*

~ Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*

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As a novelist, Edith Wharton portrayed the world around her exactly as she perceived it. At times, the result is unnerving social realism, as the characters who prove the most capable of survival are often the most unappealing ones. Blake Nevius identifies Wharton’s harsh realism among the factors that prevent her work from taking its rightful place in literary history: “Critics agree that she was too well bred, too narrow in her social outlook, too chillingly rational in her treatment of experience to convince us always of the authenticity of her sympathies or to maintain a real hold on the affections of the reading public” (3-4). Indeed, much of her work unforgivingly critiques the upper class world that she was raised in.

Born into New York high society, Wharton most often deals with the place and people that she knows best—the wealthy upper class living in the city. Yet, this should not be seen as a limitation; to the contrary, Wharton’s novels show the dynamics in New York high society in a way that only an insider could. Nonetheless, the novelist does not limit her perspective solely to New York; she explores characters in settings as distinctive as rural New England. Thus, even more significant than her vision of high society is Wharton’s insight into human nature generally. Within and beyond the boundaries of New York, Wharton creates characters who display qualities ranging from self-sacrificing to self-serving. The ends that Wharton’s characters meet indicate her dark view of human relationships and social survival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the most selfish are the most successful.

At the core of Wharton's novels, there is a series of repeated themes. One theme that Nevius identifies is the enduring conflict between two types of characters in Wharton novels: "The larger nature . . . trapped by circumstances ironically of its own devising into consanguinity with a meaner nature . . . There is no accounting for such disastrous unions except as a result of the generous but misguided impulses of the larger nature; there is no justifying their waste of human resources" (9-10). This intimate struggle between the larger and meaner natures defines many of Wharton's most well known novels. Wharton exposes this truth in her fiction: once trapped by the meaner nature, the larger nature is often suppressed, if it can even survive.

In order to discuss this conflict in more detail, defining the terms "larger" and "meaner" will be necessary. By "larger" nature I will mean characters who are magnanimous, thoughtful, and self-sacrificing; these are characters who possess a higher spiritual quality and who are capable of an aesthetic appreciation of the world around them. By "meaner" I will mean characters who are ambitious, materialistic, manipulative, conventional, and self-serving; these are characters who will sacrifice others to secure their personal security and success. Both terms may mean different things when applied to different characters, but the core characteristics of larger and meaner natures are consistent.

Four of Wharton's most accomplished novels—*The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920)—are central to a discussion of her idea of larger and meaner natures. In these novels, the larger and meaner natures are portrayed in different ways, but in each there is at least one example of both.

The earliest novel of the four, *The House of Mirth*, provides a glimpse into the larger and meaner natures as they co-exist within a single character: Lily Bart. Lily demonstrates characteristics of the meaner and larger natures; she begins the novel as a manipulative social

climber, but gradually reveals her magnanimity. In spite of her displays of generosity at the end of the novel, Lily must confront meaner natures of individuals and society. The devastating results for the young woman prove the susceptibility of the larger nature to the meaner nature; thus, the larger nature becomes associated with a degree of weakness in Wharton's earliest novel considered here.

In *Ethan Frome*, Wharton provides her readers with very clear-cut examples of a larger and a meaner nature: Ethan and Zeena Frome. Ethan is the embodiment of the larger nature; he is a simple man, but a generous caretaker who sacrifices his passion for responsibility. Zeena, by contrast, is amongst Wharton's villains; she is a strong-willed and callous woman who focuses on her security and enjoys the misery of the people closest to her. Ethan's inability to escape the powerful Zeena in this novel is proof of the strength of the meaner nature to defeat the larger nature.

*The Custom of the Country* features another infamous Wharton woman: Undine Spragg. Undine is characterized by her restless ambition, materialism, and willingness to exploit anyone to secure her personal success. Among those exploited is her second husband, Ralph Marvell. Ralph fits Nevius' larger nature perfectly; he is a generous and thoughtful character who remains trapped by the meaner spirit "ironically of [his] own devising" (10). Ralph has clear opportunities to escape Undine's oppression, but he chooses not to; at least until he is so devastated that he takes his own life. Like Lily's magnanimity, Ralph's larger nature becomes identical to weakness; by the end of the novel, his behavior borders on pathetic.

*The Age of Innocence* complicates the discussion for a number of reasons. Three characters will be considered: Newland Archer, May Welland, and Ellen Olenska. Newland, with qualities similar to Ralph's, embodies the larger nature and does not escape in spite of his means

to do so. May is the representation of the meaner nature; she seeks personal security and is willing to sacrifice anything to achieve it. Yet, May is not the villain; she is merely the product of her New York society. By this novel, it is clear that conventional society itself is the villain. In addition to the complex antagonist in *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen also adds another layer to the discussion; she is a larger character—spirited, generous, and self-sacrificing—but she is far stronger than any of the other larger-natured characters whom Wharton creates in her novels.

As Nevius argues, the tragedy in Wharton's work is that the meaner-natured characters, as undesirable as their characteristics are, consistently trap the larger-natured characters. Two of the Wharton novels considered here, *Ethan Frome* and *The Custom of the Country*, will provide concrete evidence of this trend in Wharton's novels. Yet, these two center novels are not the only ones that will be considered. In her bookend novels, *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton creates more complicated characters. In the former, Lily Bart demonstrates the internal conflict between her own larger and meaner natures. In the latter novel, Wharton does not represent the meaner nature with a single individual; instead, she considers the whole of conventional New York society as the meaner nature. *The Age of Innocence* also includes a unique example of the larger nature: Ellen Olenska. While Ellen suffers setbacks, like all of the larger-natured characters, she demonstrates strength that none of the other larger-natured characters considered ever match.

Wharton's first and final novels of the four considered here are more complex compared to the two center novels, which have clear-cut examples of the larger and meaner natures. Exploring the complicated larger and meaner natures in her bookend novels will undoubtedly expand upon Nevius' argument. Undoubtedly, Wharton set herself a more challenging task in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, as she constructed multi-dimensional protagonists



and antagonists. In these novels, identifying a “villain” is challenging because the possibility for dueling natures within a single person and an antagonistic society are brought to the forefront. The outcome of each of the bookend novels considered here will reveal Wharton’s changing perceptions of the larger and meaner natures over time.

## **II. *The House of Mirth***

*“There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive’s gasps grew fainter.”*

~ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

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Published in 1905, *The House of Mirth* centers on Lily Bart, a beautiful and sociable twenty-nine-year-old woman living in New York City. Lily’s conflict at the outset is that in spite of the fact that she is an eligible woman she is still single. The point of view varies over the course of the novel, but the focus is ever on Lily Bart. Lily’s character is difficult to pinpoint: she oscillates between the meaner and larger natures. On the one hand, she is driven by a self-serving, restless ambition and she yearns for excessive wealth and luxury. On the other hand, Lily demonstrates a desire to free her spirit and reveals her magnanimity in pivotal moments. Lily’s erratic alternation between the two natures makes her one of Wharton’s most interesting character studies. After giving up several opportunities to marry for wealth—each man worse than the previous—Lily finally proves that she is a self-sacrificing character in a pivotal act of altruism. However, Lily’s good deed does not halt her downward spiral, which reveals

Wharton's outlook on the survival of the larger nature in New York high society: those who are willing to sacrifice themselves to save others will not be saved in turn.

The novel begins with Lawrence Selden spotting Lily Bart from across a Grand Central Station. While most of the novel is narrated from Lily's point of view, this moment from Selden's point of view effectively sets up Lily as the novel's heroine:

She stood apart from the crowd, letting it drift by her to the platform or the street, and wearing an air of irresolution which might, as he surmised, be the mask of some very definite purpose . . . There was nothing new about Lily Bart, yet he could never see her without a faint movement of interest; it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation, that her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions. (6)

Here, Selden observes Lily from afar with a very specific interest in her. There is no doubt that Lily stands out in particular to Selden; at this point the reason for the interest, whether it is aesthetic or romantic, is unclear. Selden's powerful attraction to Lily, whatever the cause, draws the audience to her as well. From the opening paragraph, Wharton establishes Lily as a character fascinating enough to be the focus of an entire novel.

Notably, the narrator does not uphold Selden's point of view as a reliable source of information for very long. Instead, the narrator suggests that Selden's exaggerated response to Lily's presence is flawed:

Selden was conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her nearness . . .  
everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine.  
He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to

produce her. He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. (7)

Selden takes an aesthetic interest in Lily and elevates her above all other women; the narrator's descriptions from Selden's point of view raise her to an exaggerated goddess status. However, the diction points to Wharton's ironic tone: Selden "takes a luxurious pleasure in Lily's nearness" and considers Lily one step above "the herd" solely because of her "external" beauty (7). With this word choice, Wharton's narrator portrays Selden critically, suggesting that he reduces Lily to a glib attraction available for his indulgence. The narrator's construction of this scene becomes ironic later: Lily's beauty makes her stand out among women initially, but her flaws allow the "herd" to trample her later. This scene is essential to the larger novel for this irony and for the narrator to reaffirm Lily as an intriguing, glamorous character who is a worthwhile focus. In fact, while there are some important peripheral characters, *The House of Mirth* is unique amongst the novels considered here because Lily's character is so variable that she can be considered completely in her own right, even in a discussion of both the larger and meaner natures.

After meeting Selden in Grand Central Station, Lily accompanies him back to his apartment in order to escape the heat while she waits for her train to Bellomont. In the scene that follows, the narrator provides insight into the complexities of Lily's character. Lily desires wealth and luxuries because she is a product of her society:

As he watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist, he was struck with the irony of suggesting to her such a life as his cousin Gertrude Farish had chosen. She was so

evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate. (9)

The narrator speaks of Lily as a “victim” because her family and society fostered a sense of entitlement in her from a young age. At first glance, this description raises sympathy for Lily: She wants the security of wealth that she has had for her entire life. However, the narrator describes this scene from Selden’s point of view, which was proven flawed in the first scene of the novel. Thus, his definition of “victim” must be questioned here; does Lily deserve sympathy or should she be criticized for her sense of entitlement?

Although Selden’s description does hint at societal responsibility, the fact that the only thing chaining Lily to her fate is an expensive bracelet makes her situation seem less than dire. Lily comments directly on the way that society operates and her personal victimization:

“Your coat’s a little shabby—but who cares? It doesn’t keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don’t make success, but they are part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed until we drop—and if we can’t keep it up alone; we have to go into partnership.” (14)

Lily argues that she does not simply have a crude want for material elegance, nor is she just trying to secure herself a husband for the sake of marriage. Lily believes that her success—perhaps even survival—in her society is based on her physical beauty and her status as a “marriageable” woman. While Lily remarks on a valid difference in expectations for men and women, there is no denying that she enjoys being attractive and well-dressed and uses those features to her advantage. The narrator presents Lily’s argument ironically here and points to her

personal vanity. The juxtaposition of these two moments—Selden’s recognition of Lily as victim, as well as Lily’s ironic sense of her own victimization—complicates Wharton’s portrayal of the protagonist, especially whether or not her title of victim is entirely justified. At this point in the novel, the question remains as to whether Wharton intends her readers to sympathize with or criticize the heroine.

The fact that Lily possesses meaner characteristics is undeniable; she is portrayed as vain and materialistic early in the novel. Another characteristic that must be pointed out is Lily’s moral ambiguity. She is often times portrayed as calculating and unfeeling, especially in her search for a rich husband. Lily appears willing to do anything to secure wealth. This image of Lily is obvious when the narrator describes her pursuit of the rich bachelor Percy Gryce, “Some girls would not have known how to manage him. They would have over-emphasized the novelty of the adventure, trying to make him feel in it the zest of an escapade. But Lily’s methods were more delicate” (21). Lily manages her relationship with Percy in a cold, methodical manner. This passage is not unique; in another excerpt Lily is an “operator” (21). She is comparable to a hunter who uses her charm and beauty as her bait in order to land her prey—wealthy young men. The narrator does not soften the image of Lily as a skilled manipulator, nor are her reasons for marrying Percy justified. In fact, the narrator looks at the situation from Lily’s point of view—she views a marriage to Percy as a “hateful” fate because he is so boring. She wants to marry Percy solely because he is wealthy. The narrator provides an uncompromisingly honest portrayal of the heroine’s flaws.

The fact that Wharton’s narrator reliably presents her least appealing characteristics makes the presentation of her most appealing characteristics more believable. In fact, the tension between her larger and meaner qualities defines Lily; she is often impeded from taking action

because she is pulled in two different directions. When Lily arrives in Bellomont to visit the Trenors, her friends and members of New York's elite social scene, she suffers from this tension. This is evident as she turns a critical eye on the people in Bellomont that she is so eager to fit in with:

How different they had seemed to her a few hours ago! Then they had symbolized what she was gaining, now they stood for what she was giving up. That very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw that they were merely dull in a loud way. Under the glitter of their opportunities, she saw the poverty of their achievement. It was not that she wanted them to be more disinterested; but she would have liked them to be more picturesque. And she had a shamed recollection of the way in which, a few hours since, she had felt the centripetal force of their standards. (56)

As Lily stares down the table at Bellomont, she questions whether she really wants to be among the rich when the reality is that they are also the "dull" (56). As Lily observes their opulence, she cannot help but question the "poverty" of the wealthy—they have seized few opportunities and achieved very little in spite of their capacity to do so. The way that the narrator presents this scene provides honest insight into the conflict within Lily; she at once sees the benefits and pitfalls of sacrificing her spirit for wealth. Lily's clear-mindedness in moments like these makes her a much more appealing character than most of her fellow members of New York high society who show no capacity for critiquing their social system.

In spite of her early ambitions, Lily proves indecisive in the final steps of securing Percy as her husband. After realizing the dullness of her companions at Bellomont, Lily chooses to break with conventions and ascend the hills above Bellomont rather than joining Percy and the

other members of her party at church on Sunday. Transgressing social expectations provides Lily with a sense of liberation and exhilaration:

Lily had no real intimacy with nature, but she had a passion for the appropriate and could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background for her own sensations. The landscape outspread below her seemed an enlargement of her present mood, and she found something of herself in its calmness, its breadth, its long free reaches. (63-64)

The narrator shows Lily's response to the landscape around her and, particularly, her feelings of freedom in this environment. She and Selden rise above the pettiness of Bellomont and can enjoy the world outside of their strict social hierarchy. Yet, Lily cannot forget her mission: to secure a future with Percy. Moments later, the narrator emphasizes the duality within Lily's character: "There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive's gasps grew fainter" (64). Lily is worried about securing wealth and stability for herself and at the same time relieved to be released from her restless ambitions. The narrator's revelation that the latter sense of freedom overcomes the former worries, at least for a moment, reveals Lily's refusal to commit herself to her ambitions if that requires the total sacrifice of her autonomy. Unfortunately, the sound of a motor on the road to Bellomont brings Lily back to reality: "Lily started from her attitude of total absorption; her smile faded and she began to move toward the lane. 'I had no idea it was so late! We shall not be back till after dark,' she said, almost impatiently" (73). Lily's decision to descend from the hills is symbolic of her desire—and, her belief that she must—resume her mission to secure a suitable husband.

The tension within Lily is obvious at multiple points in the novel. In spite of her choice to descend from the hills with Selden, Lily does not always conform to conventions. In fact, she relinquishes her pursuit of Percy soon after the scene described above. The fact that Lily gives up Percy after her personal crisis is evidence that she does tend toward the larger nature. Lily experiences a series of crises that demonstrate the tension between her larger and meaner nature; this prevails through the novel. Lily pursues a series of men—Percy Gryce, George Dorset, and Simon Rosedale—with each one worse than the previous. In each case, she lets go of the man at the last instance, no matter what wealth or security he has to offer. Mrs. Fisher sums up Lily's never-ending struggle in a comment to Selden, "'Sometimes,' she added, 'I think it's just flightiness—and sometimes I think it's because at heart, she despises the things she's trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study'" (185). Mrs. Fisher sums up Lily's core: she cannot commit herself to an unfulfilling fate. No matter how close Lily may come to sacrificing her autonomy for the promise of wealth, she always stops before she sacrifices her larger nature completely.

Even though Lily favors her larger nature over her meaner nature, she cannot count on others to do the same. Bertha Dorset, one of Lily's female peers in New York high society, proves her greatest rival. Although Bertha is often contemptuous of Lily, the heroine often shows magnanimity to Bertha. In the latter half of the novel, Lily travels with Bertha and her husband, George Dorset, on their yacht *Sabrina* in the Mediterranean Sea. During their voyage, Lily does Bertha a number of favors. First, she prevents George from learning about Bertha's affair with a travel companion. In addition, Lily rejects George's proposal to leave his wife and marry her. Lily sacrifices additional opportunities to secure wealth for herself. Arguably, Lily may wish to preserve her reputation, which would be damaged if she wrecked the Dorsets' marriage. At the



same time, Lily's actions demonstrate solidarity with Bertha that the latter woman never reciprocates. In fact, Bertha continues to antagonize Lily in spite of her generosity—she is ultimately one of the greatest contributors to Lily's downfall when she kicks her off of the *Sabrina* and sparks rumors of an affair between Lily and George.

Surprisingly, when Lily has the opportunity to blackmail her tormenter, she finds herself torn. Lily has the means to extort money from Bertha and to improve her own personal status, which she desperately wants—and perhaps needs—to do by the latter part of the novel. Although Bertha destroys Lily's reputation and removes any opportunities that she had for wealth and opportunity, Lily grapples with resorting to blackmail:

What debt did she owe to a social order which had condemned and banished her without trial? She had never been heard in her own defence; she was innocent of the charge on which she had been found guilty; and the irregularity of her conviction might seem to justify the use of methods as irregular in recovering her lost rights. Bertha Dorset, to save herself, had not scrupled to ruin her by an open falsehood; why should she hesitate to make private use of the facts that chance had put her way? (292)

Lily struggles with the question of what—if anything—she owes to Bertha, who was quick to sacrifice Lily's reputation when her own was at stake on the *Sabrina*. Bertha, who is the epitome of the meaner nature in Wharton's fiction, has no qualms about destroying another's reputation in order to save her own marriage. Lily is hesitant to do the same; she demonstrates integrity as she makes her decision. Not only is Lily at odds with Bertha, she must consider an entire society that has “condemned and banished her without trial” (292). Lily does not owe anything to Bertha or her society, but she wrestles with what choice she can live with nonetheless.

Ultimately, Lily decides to play fair with Bertha and with a society that has been anything but fair to her. In her most heroic moment, Lily decides to throw the letters that she would have used to blackmail Bertha into Selden's fire, "When she rose he fancied that he saw her draw something from her dress and drop it into the fire; but he hardly noticed the gesture at the time. His faculties seemed tranced, and he was still groping for the words to break the spell" (302). The narrator provides a glimpse into Lily's thought process as she contends with this decision; the battle between the larger and meaner natures is clear. Lily's final sacrifice reveals the triumph of her larger nature over her meaner nature.

In Lily's bold act of magnanimity, she sacrifices her access to power. She proves the strength of her larger characteristics—morality, magnanimity, and a desire for freedom—over her meaner ones—ambition and materialism. Ultimately, this noble self-sacrifice cannot avert Lily from her downward spiral, though. The tragic heroine, Lily Bart, sacrifices herself to uphold her larger nature, but she has no control over the meaner society in which she lives. The high society that Lily once yearned to be a part of is quick to forget Lily once she is expelled from the *Sabrina* and fallen farther from grace. As sympathetic as Wharton is with Lily, her ultimate message is grim: the larger nature is not fit for survival in a mean society.

### **III. Ethan Frome**

*"Ethan looked at her with loathing. She was no longer the listless creature who had lived at his side in a state of sullen self-absorption, but a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding. It was the sense of helplessness that sharpened his antipathy."*

~ Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*

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Ethan Frome, the protagonist and namesake of Edith Wharton's 1911 novella, is perhaps one of her most impressionistic characters. In stark contrast to Wharton's normal focus on rich New York high society, Ethan lives in a bleak New England village. He does not fit into the mold of his hometown. Ethan dreams of escape from the physically monotonous and passionless life that he leads, but he is held back by his commitments to other people. Ethan's responsibility reveals his selflessness, which unfortunately never pays off. He misses out on romantic love and happiness and ends up destined for a life of misery with no possibility of escape. Just as she does in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton asserts a tragic world for her characters: the larger nature is destined for defeat, in spite of its virtues, because there are meaner forces capable of overpowering it.

*Ethan Frome* diverges from other Wharton novels considered here because of its setting and narrative technique. The novel is set in the New England village of Starkfield, Massachusetts. The location is as unwelcoming as it sounds, especially in the dreary winter months that the action occurs. In terms of narrative technique, Wharton constructs a narrator who is clearly an outsider. A visitor from the city, Wharton's sophisticated narrator is capable of articulating what he sees, hears, and infers about Ethan Frome during his journey to Starkfield; indeed, Wharton must create such a narrator because the characters in Starkfield are more reticent than the ones in New York high society. The first image of Ethan comes from this narrator,

It was there that, several years ago, I saw him for the first time; and the sight pulled me up sharp. Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man. It was not so much his great height that

marked him . . . it was the careless powerful look he had, in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain. There was something bleak and unapproachable in his face, and he was so stiffened and grizzled that I took him for an old man and was surprised to hear that he was not more than fifty-two. (3)

Although Ethan cannot narrate his story himself, the narrator establishes him as a worthy protagonist and raises questions about him; in particular, what has aged him so grievously? The narrator is so intrigued by Ethan's history that he questions other inhabitants of Starkfield about him. Harmon, one such informant, provides insight into Ethan's aged appearance, "He's looked that way ever since the smash-up; and that's twenty-four years ago come next February" (4). The narrator also learns about Ethan's difficult history from Harmon,

"Guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters. Most of the smart ones get away."

"Why didn't he?" "Someone had to stay and care for the folks. There warn't ever anybody but Ethan. Fust his father—then his mother—then his wife."

"And then the smash-up?"

Harmon chuckled sardonically. "That's so. He *had* to stay then."

"I see. And since then they've had to care for them?"

Harmon thoughtfully passed his tobacco to the other cheek. "Oh, as to that: I guess it's always Ethan done the caring." (6)

Harmon reveals that Ethan is considered a responsible individual who has been a lifelong caretaker. These characteristics comprise Ethan's larger nature. At the same time, Harmon's comments bring a flaw to the surface; unlike the "smart" ones—which is ironically not a term used to describe any residents of the small-town—Ethan has never left Starkfield in spite of

hardships. A potential for weakness is brought to the forefront with this description. The narrator finds his curiosity piqued and wonders, “How could any combination of obstacles have hindered a man like Ethan Frome?” (8). The narrator’s questions motivate the construction of Ethan Frome’s life story, framed here as a tale of destruction.

The narrator does not build an entire tale on the words of others alone. After hiring Ethan as a driver, he has personal interactions with the title character. Their verbal interactions become more frequent over time, and the narrator begins to learn details about Ethan’s life. At the end of the introductory chapter, the narrator ends up at Ethan’s home to spend the night during a bad snowstorm. As he enters, the narrator describes the total sensory experience: “I went after him into a low unlit passage, at the back of which a ladder-like staircase rose into obscurity. On our right, a line of light marked the door of the room which had sent its ray across the night; and behind the door, I heard a woman’s voice drowning querulously” (22). At this point in the novel, the narrator reveals that he plans to tell Ethan’s story, based on what he has learned, “It was that night that I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of his story” (22). For the remainder of the novel, the narrator provides an imaginative reconstruction by piecing together the story from various people and his personal visit to Ethan’s home.

From the narrator’s point of view, readers learn of Ethan’s larger nature—he is a selfless and generous man who cares for his sickly wife in spite of her manipulative behavior. These characteristics, paired with reticence, suggest that Ethan’s larger nature is paired with a weaker spirit and indecisiveness. If Lily Bart is taken as an example, then Ethan’s weakness already suggests a grim outlook. Ethan’s inaction and reticence will not serve as his only adversaries. Readers also are introduced to the antagonist Zeena, Ethan’s wife. Her meaner nature—her vindictive and selfish tendencies—is evident through Wharton’s direct and indirect

characterization over the course of the novel. Ultimately, Wharton proves that Zeena, while an insufferable character, proves a callous strength that the larger-natured Ethan can never match.

When the narrator flashes back 24 years to tell of the events leading up to the “smash-up,” he introduces a “young Ethan Frome” (23). Ethan hastily walks to a destination unbeknownst to readers. Our first image of Ethan is as he lingers outside a dance in his church:

The young man, skirting the side of the building, went down the slope towards the basement floor. To keep out of range of the revealing rays from within he made a circuit through the untrodden snow and gradually approached the farther angle of the basement wall. Thence, still hugging the shadow, he edged his way cautiously forward to the nearest window, holding back his straight spare body and craning his neck till he got a glimpse of the room. Seen thus, from the pure and frosty darkness in which he stood, it seemed to be seething in a mist of heat. (25)

Thus, Ethan is immediately established as an outsider. He maneuvers through the snow, outside the light, in order to remain unseen while he watches the dance within the church. Ethan is cold in the “frosty darkness” set apart from the “mist of heat” within; this impressionistic description reveals the generally cold and solitary nature of Ethan’s existence. Quickly, though, it becomes clear that there is one source of warmth in Ethan’s life: “Half-way up the slope Mattie stumbled against some unseen obstruction and clutched his sleeve to steady herself. The wave of warmth that went through him was like the prolongation of his vision . . . they walked on as if they were floating on a summer stream” (45). When Ethan is with the young woman, he feels joy unmatched elsewhere in his life. Yet, Mattie can provide only so much for Ethan. His entrapment in a loveless marriage prevents him from pursuing romance with Mattie.

Zeena Frome, Ethan's cold wife, is among Wharton's most infamous characters. She is a source of intrigue for both Wharton and her readers. The narrator comments on Zeena's reputation in the small New England town early in the novel: "[She] had always been what Starkfield calls 'sickly'" (31). These early comments are mysterious—"sickly," offset by quotation marks is clearly a loaded term here. Soon, it becomes clear that Zeena's "sickly" nature is far from sympathetic—with this diction, Wharton points to the fact that Zeena herself is a mean character who exploits her fragility to manipulate Ethan and Mattie. The narrator juxtaposes this terminology with other descriptive details that emphasize Zeena's harsh physical features and her cold demeanor. After Ethan walks Mattie home from the church, the two realize that they have been locked out of the house. As Ethan fumbles around looking for the key, they suddenly encounter Zeena in the doorway of the dim kitchen on a dark winter's night. Looking at her from Ethan's point of view, the narrator provides a striking description of Zeena that draws attention to her harsh features:

Against the dark background of the kitchen she stood up tall and angular, one hand drawing a counterpane to her flat breast, while the other held a lamp. The light, on a level with her chin, drew out of the darkness her puckered throat and the projecting wrist of the hand that clutched the quilt, and deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping pins. To Ethan, still in the rosy haze of his hour with Mattie, the sight came with the intense precision of the last dream before waking. He felt as if he had never before known what his wife looked like. (47)

In this passage, the narrator imagines Zeena unforgivingly—she is "tall and angular"—lacking feminine curves—she is also "puckered" and "hollow" and wears sharp, metallic "crimping

pins.” These descriptors come together in an image of Zeena that is altogether unfavorable; she is cold, harsh, and unfeminine. Ethan’s awareness of his wife’s character—and, subsequently, his hatred for her—grows over time.

As important as moments of physical revulsion are moments of psychological torment. Zeena is an emotionally manipulative character. In spite of her “illnesses,” she proves capable of dominating Ethan. At one point, Zeena takes an overnight journey to meet with yet another doctor about her chronic illness. While she is out of town, Ethan and Mattie are able to spend an evening alone together for the first time. Yet, even with Zeena physically absent, her spiritual presence is undeniable. Wharton develops a symbol of Zeena’s omnipresence in the form of Puss the cat:

The cat, unnoticed, had crept up on muffled paws from Zeena’s seat to the table, and was stealthily elongating its body in the direction of the milk-jug, which stood between Ethan and Mattie. The two leaned forward at the same moment and their hands met on the handle of the jug. Mattie’s hand was underneath, and Ethan kept his clasped on a moment longer than was necessary. The cat, profiting by this unusual demonstration, tried to effect an unnoticed retreat, and in doing so backed into the pickle-dish, which fell to the floor with a crash. (74)

Puss is clearly connected to Zeena; he moves directly from “Zeena’s seat.” The fact that the cat interrupts one of the most romantic moments between Mattie and Ethan cannot be a coincidence. Indeed, the power that Zeena has to shatter their relationship and to interrupt their passion—turning the scene cold in an instant—is entirely evident here. Puss is not the only evidence of Zeena’s dominance in the household. Later the same evening, Mattie attempts to sit in the chair



that her cousin Zeena normally occupies. The description of the scene that follows reveals, once more, Zeena's potency:

Zeena's empty rocking-chair stood facing him. Mattie rose obediently and seated herself in it. As her young brown head detached itself against the patchwork cushion that habitually framed his wife's gaunt countenance, Ethan had a momentary shock. It was as if the other face, the face of the superseded woman, had obliterated the intruder. After a moment Mattie seemed to be affected by the same sense of constraint. (78)

Subsequently, Mattie moves out of Zeena's chair. The authority that Zeena has over the people closest to her, namely Ethan and Mattie, is nowhere as evident as in these particular scenes. Ethan's fear in his wife's absence signals his weakness. Ethan could have asserted himself and told Mattie to remain in Zeena's seat; after all she is not really present and can do nothing to hurt either of them. The fact that Ethan shrinks from such action reveals the extent of his wife's control over him. Zeena's spiritual presence is chilling and the power of her meaner spirit alone unnerves Ethan.

Zeena's cold demeanor towards Ethan is also clear in their interactions with one another. A prime example of this occurs when Zeena determines that Mattie must be out of the Frome household at once to make room for new hired help. She commands Mattie's immediate departure with no sense of remorse. Her indifference is in complete contrast with the powerful wave of anguish that overcomes Ethan. Indeed, Zeena relishes their contrasting reactions, "Zeena waited a moment, as if giving him time to feel the full force of the contrast between his own excitement and her composure. Then she replied in the same smooth voice: 'I know well enough what they say of my having kep' her here as long as I have'" (102). Here, Zeena demonstrates

not only her knowledge of the romance between Mattie and Ethan, but also her power over her husband—she is in complete control and throws out any argument that Ethan might put forth to try and keep Mattie with them. Realizing that he has been beaten by his wife's calculated, passionless argument, Ethan reverts to silence and experiences rising rage:

Ethan looked at her with loathing. She was no longer the listless creature who had lived at his side in a state of sullen self-absorption, but a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding. It was the sense of helplessness that sharpened his antipathy. There had never been anything in her that one could appeal to; but as long as he could ignore and command he had remained indifferent. Now she had mastered him and he abhorred her. All the long misery of his baffled past, of his youth of failure, hardship and vain effort, rose up in his soul in bitterness and seemed to take shape before him in the woman who at every turn had barred his way. She had taken everything else from him; and now she meant to take the one thing that made up for all the others. For a moment such a flame of hate rose in him . . . (103)

This is an important moment for a couple of reasons. First, Ethan is typically a calm man. Yet, in this moment, he experiences rising passions—particularly anger—unlike anything that we have seen. Second, Ethan seems ready in this moment to assert himself and to overcome Zeena once and for all. Quickly afterwards, though, it becomes clear that Ethan cannot—or will not—ever be strong enough to defeat Zeena. His weak will, which was foreshadowed earlier in the novel, puts a cap on his rising anger and leaves him susceptible to domination by her mean nature. Thus, Wharton demonstrates that Ethan, in spite of his larger nature and momentary rage, is too weak to overcome the powerful meaner nature.

Rather than confronting Zeena, Ethan's larger nature leads him to look for a way out for himself and Mattie. He seeks to defy Zeena's authority indirectly. His first thought is to run away with Mattie, but he quickly realizes the impossibility of this option, "He drew the lantern nearer and eagerly scanned the fares; then the paper fell from his hand and he pushed aside his unfinished letter. A moment ago he had wondered what he and Mattie were to live on once they reached the West; now he saw he had not even the money to take her there" (116). Ethan is defeated when he realizes the difficulty of escaping his loveless marriage and dreary Starkfield with Mattie. Ethan's dejectedness is portrayed through his actions; Ethan "drops" the paper, demonstrating his surprise, and leaves the letter "unfinished," indicating his resignation to his fate. In this particular passage, Ethan seems almost entirely limited by his poverty. Yet, something else stands in his way—guilt at the thought of leaving his wife to fend for herself. Before he realized the state of his finances, Ethan dwelled on what Zeena's future would hold if he left her, "And what of Zeena's fate? . . . How could she keep the farm going? . . . his wife, even if she were in better health than she imagined, could never carry such a burden alone" (116). Although this passage comes before Ethan's submission to his fate, there is no doubt that some of his guilt-ridden questions still linger. Finances alone do not stop Ethan from abandoning Zeena and their farm; his conscience, which is more evidence of his larger nature, stops him from leaving her.

In spite of his poverty and guilty conscience, Ethan makes one final attempt to free himself and Mattie from Zeena's manipulative authority without running away. The lovers go sleigh-riding before Mattie's departure from Starkfield. After their joyous ride, Mattie makes a suicidal proposal: "She put her lips close against his ear to say: 'Right into the big elm. You said you could. So 't we'd never have to leave each other any more'" (143). Ethan attempts to steer

their sleigh directly into an elm tree to kill both himself and Mattie; yet, this plan fails miserably. In a tragically ironic twist, Ethan ends up spending the rest of his life with Mattie as he had always wished, but she is never the same woman after their sleigh-riding accident. Ethan, Mattie, and Zeena live together with nothing but a bleak future to look forward to together. Entrapped, Ethan is totally and utterly desolate. In contrast, Zeena thrives amidst Mattie and Ethan's misery.

The novella ends with Zeena the most content of anyone in the Frome household. At the end of the novel, Mrs. Hale, one of the narrator's informants, provides him with details about the state of their household, twenty-four years after the "smash-up":

'...And Zeena, she was always cranky. Not but what she bears with Mattie wonderful—I've seen that myself. But sometimes the two of them get going at each other, and then Ethan's face'd break your heart . . . When I see that, I think it's *him* that suffers most . . . anyhow it ain't Zeena...' (156)

Zeena's meaner nature, her self-serving and manipulative ways, proves dominant over Ethan's larger nature. Not even Ethan's attempts to pursue romance with Mattie save him. In fact, his love for Mattie proves to be a final weakness for Zeena to exploit. As in many of her novels, Wharton establishes a strong moral character, Ethan, defeated by a character that lives to serve herself, Zeena.

*Ethan Frome* concludes with a powerful message: the meaner nature will always defeat the better nature, no matter how strong the latter's virtues may be. The key difference between this ending and the conclusion to *The House of Mirth* is that the larger-natured Ethan does survive; although, it is difficult to say whether living the rest of his life in misery is more desirable than Lily's death. In the first two novels considered here, Wharton designs equally grim, albeit distinctive, outcomes for the larger nature.

#### IV. *The Custom of the Country*

*“The flames of love that had played about his passion for his wife had died down to its embers; all the transfiguring hopes and illusions were gone, but they had left an unquenchable ache for her nearness, her smile, her touch.”*

~ Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*

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The trend in Wharton novels for the self-sacrificing and thoughtful characters to be trapped by the self-serving and manipulative characters is perhaps nowhere as evident as it is in her 1913 novel *The Custom of the Country*. Wharton’s antiheroine Undine Spragg is the protagonist; yet, throughout the majority of the work, Undine antagonizes the people closest to her, including her parents and her husbands. Each time Undine attains what she wants, she finds herself only wanting more. She grasps for “more,” whatever that may be, with no regard to the impact on the people around her; ultimately, she leaves a path of destruction behind her and feels no guilt. Undine embodies the meaner nature with her restless ambition, materialism, and lack of remorse. In contrast, her second husband Ralph represents the larger nature—he possesses a higher spiritual quality and makes sacrifices for his wife and child. Specifically analyzing Undine’s nature and her relationship with Ralph not only proves the extent to which she exploits the people around her for her own purposes, but also the destructive ends that the larger nature meets at the hands of the meaner nature.

Undine, whom the narrator describes as “fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative” early in the novel, yearns to climb ever higher on the social ladder (13). She moves to New York with her parents after her first marriage, which is annulled and, subsequently, kept a secret throughout most of the novel. Her mother justifies the move by reasoning that “they had

left Apex because Undine was too big for the place” (9). At the same time, however, her mother fears that her daughter may not be capable of creating a name for herself in the big city, “She seemed as yet—poor child! —Too small for New York; actually imperceptible to its heedless multitudes; and her mother trembled for the day when her invisibility should be borne in on her” (9). While Undine does experience bouts of “nervousness” at first, she quickly proves that she is similar to Lily Bart—she is capable of doing whatever it takes to move up the social hierarchy. However, their shared ability to navigate the social hierarchy is where the similarities between Undine and Lily end; Undine never stops short of totally exploiting people for her own ends. Unlike Lily, Undine is totally guided by her meaner nature; she never demonstrates attributes of the larger nature.

One of Undine’s most definitive attributes is her restless ambition. This is also one of her least flattering characteristics. Early in the novel, she vows to attain one of her goals without being held back: “This time her fears were superfluous: there were to be no more mistakes or follies now! She was going to know the right people at last—she was going to get what she wanted” (20). The narrator focuses on Undine’s thought process here and the result is ironic—in reality, all of her desires are “superfluous.” Her willingness to choose “the right people” to help reach her ends and to “get what she wants,” no matter what that may be, also speaks to her meaner nature. Undine is ambitious and materialistic with no remorse. Her ultimate success requires the exploitation of numerous people, as her wants are constantly evolving. At one point, the narrator illustrates how quickly Undine’s desires arise:

Presently her attention was drawn to a lady in black who was examining the pictures through a tortoise-shell eye-glass adorned with diamonds and hanging from a long pearl chain. Undine was instantly struck by the opportunities which

this toy presented for graceful wrist movements and supercilious turns of the head. It seemed suddenly plebian and promiscuous to look at the world with a naked eye, and all her floating desires were merged in the wish for a jeweled eye-glass and chain. So violent was this wish that, drawn on in the wake of the owner of the eye-glass, she found herself bumping against a . . . young man . . . (32)

In addition to proving how suddenly Undine discovers and falls for new and intriguing things, this excerpt also demonstrates her total absorption in material wants. Undine believes that material objects bring “opportunities” to the people who own them. As the action progresses, the narrator provides a chillingly critical view of Undine’s willingness to sacrifice people for material items. These sacrifices are worthwhile to her because more material items equate to heightened social status.

Materialism is by no means Undine’s single flaw; to the contrary, Wharton develops her protagonist as a strictly “anti”-heroine from the outset. Undine’s beauty, similar to Lily’s attractiveness, proves one of her greatest assets in New York high society. Undine’s total awareness of her beauty and its impact on people, including total strangers, provides insight into another character flaw: “She had to content herself with the gaze of admiration which she left in her wake along the pavement; but she was used to the homage of the streets and her vanity craved a choicer fare” (31). This personal “vanity” is another in a series of critical descriptors that the narrator applies to the protagonist. The emphasis on Undine’s flaws from the outset creates little, if any, sympathy for her. Not only is she an unappealing character, her flawed behavior is often inexplicable. The narrator provides a glimpse into Undine’s ambition, as she broods one evening:

Undine lay silent, her hands clasped behind her head. She was plunged into one of the moods of bitter retrospection when all her past seemed like a long struggle for something she could not have, from a trip to Europe to an opera-box; and when she felt sure that, as the past had been, so the future would be. And yet, as she had often told her parents, all she sought for was improvement: she honestly wanted the best. (34)

Clearly, Wharton and her narrator are providing ironic insight into Undine's character; Undine's "need" for European vacations and outings to the Opera is less than dire. Yet, Wharton creates an image of Undine in a "bitter" mood—frustrated with the fact that there is so much that she has yet to do or to own. Undoubtedly, Wharton's narrator is criticizing Undine through this ironic use of point of view. Juxtaposing this moment with ones of true anguish for other characters later in the novel will actually prove the limits of Undine's "struggle" in contrast with what she inflicts on other characters, especially Ralph Marvell.

Much of *The Custom of the Country* focuses on the relationship between Undine and Ralph. At first, Ralph perceives himself as Undine's savior. He believes that he is capable of snatching her out of the jaws of New York high society:

He seemed to see her as he sat there, pressing his fists into his temples—he seemed to see her like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her; and himself whirling down on his winged horse—just Pegasus turned Rosinante for the nonce—to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue . . . (54)

Yet Ralph's illusions about changing Undine are short-lived. He tries to satisfy her demands at first; Wharton compares Ralph's behavior with Undine to that of "humouring an irresistible



child” (91). On multiple occasions, Ralph compares Undine to “child” because he believes that she is naïve and egocentric. Ralph is soon disappointed to find that freeing Undine from her selfishness and vanity, which are perpetuated and even encouraged within her social circles of choice, will be nearly impossible. Ralph’s shattered visions of his life with Undine reveal his ignorance of the power of the meaner nature. Wharton creates an ironic twist: the larger natured Ralph is more like a naïve “child” than the powerful, mean Undine.

As Ralph realizes Undine’s nature, his point of view provides readers with greater insight into the flaws of both the larger and meaner natures in himself and Undine, respectively. Ralph begins to look at Undine more critically. He notices how quickly she changes herself when in the company of new people: “He knew also that Undine’s faculty of self-defence was weakened by the instinct of adapting herself to whatever company she was in, of copying ‘the others’ in speech and gesture as closely as she reflected them in dress; and he was disturbed by the thought” (112). Ralph critiques Undine, but also demonstrates his care for how she turns out. In spite of Undine’s unappealing qualities and behaviors, Ralph does not abandon his “cause”—shaping Undine’s character. Instead, Ralph attempts to confront Undine often in order to try to correct these flaws; in one such moment, he addresses her as a “foolish child” and asserts his authority over her, but gains no ground (101). Undine’s deafness to Ralph’s assertions, even those that are merited, proves her obstinacy, another flaw. At the same time, his refusal to give up on Undine—while generous and honorable in the context of their marriage—proves a naïve weakness in Ralph. Again, the narrator speaks to Undine’s foolishness, but shows a character flaw in Ralph as well.

Eventually, Ralph grows subservient to Undine’s will. As her parents dreaded her anxiety and tenacity, so Ralph begins to fear her emotional turns. The couple travels abroad and suffers

severe financial strains, primarily because of Undine's greed. In Paris, for example, she spends far beyond their means on new, tailor-made dresses. Ralph knows that Undine should be cut off and that they must leave to travel back to the United States, but reveals his dread at the thought of her reaction: "He prolonged it a little in order to put off telling Undine of his plight . . . he knew how unwelcome this plan would be, and he shrank the more from seeing Undine's face harden since, of late, he had so basked in its brightness" (106). This reluctance and fear eventually grow into revulsion at the behavior in the woman that he once yearned to place on a pedestal: "Ralph's indignation had already flickered down to disgust. Undine was no longer beautiful – she seemed to have the face of her thoughts" (111). Ralph, while sometimes misguided in his quest to "save" Undine, proves a much more sympathetic character as he recognizes the flaws in Undine that readers have perceived throughout. His desire to cultivate Undine is even justifiable. She is a severely flawed, destructive character—arguably, any change would be an improvement. In fact, Ralph's genuine attempts to extricate her from the customs of high society even seem defensible; Undine's character flaws are clearly intertwined within the society that she so wishes to root herself and grow within.

In spite of all of the flaws that Ralph recognizes in his wife and the anxiety that she instills in him, he possesses a major flaw himself. He maintains a naïve hope that he and Undine may reconcile: "Yet he still fancied that some day the balance might be reversed, and that as she acquired a finer sense of values the depths in her would find a voice" (114). This desire for reconciliation becomes increasingly tragic as the novel progresses; Ralph waivers between sympathetic and pathetic, as he yearns for Undine's love in spite of her callous treatment of him:

The flames of love that had played about his passion for his wife had died down to its embers; all the transfiguring hopes and illusions were gone, but they had left

an unquenchable ache for her nearness, her smile, her touch. His life had come to nothing but a long effort to win these mercies by one concession after another: the sacrifice of his literary projects, the exchange of his profession for congenial business, and the increasing struggle to make enough money to satisfy her increasing exactions. (136)

Ralph is constantly forced to give up parts of himself, while Undine does nothing but gain; ultimately, their relationship is very parasitic, with Ralph proving the victim. Ironically, when the novel shifts back to Undine's point of view, she perceives herself as the victim in their marriage: "Undine felt herself trapped, deceived; and it was intolerable that the agent of her disillusionment should presume to be the critic of her conduct" (142). Clearly, Wharton uses the shift in point of view ironically. While Ralph's emotional turmoil garners sympathy, Undine's thoughts reveal the boundlessness of her egocentric nature rather than her victimization.

As Ralph and Undine's relationship continues to worsen over the course of the novel, the true victims become more obvious—and Undine certainly is not among them. In reality, the victims are Ralph and his son with Undine, Paul Marvell. Contrary to the romanticized notion that a child can draw out maternal instincts and bring a couple closer together, Undine's pregnancy only makes matters worse for them. In a fleeting moment, Ralph imagines his wife's pregnancy to be "wonderful and divine" and "for the moment that was all he felt" (115). However, that feeling is quickly diminished, as Undine's foulness shocks him:

Even in that moment of confusion he was struck by the cold competence of her tone and wondered how she could be so sure . . . There was another long silence. Undine lay still, her eyes shut, drumming on the arm of the sofa with a restless hand. The other lay cold in Ralph's clasp, and through it there gradually stole to

him the benumbing influence of the thoughts she was thinking: the sense of the approach of illness, anxiety, and expense, and of the unnecessary disorganization of their lives. ‘That’s all you feel then?’ he asked at length a little bitterly, as if to disguise himself from the bitter fact that he felt it too. (116)

Thus, a moment that should have been joyous becomes a miserable one for both halves of the couple. This moment demonstrates that neither the larger or meaner natured person is capable of celebration when they are weighing one another down. For Undine, the birth of their son does not bring about any newfound feelings of fondness or maternal selflessness; in fact, she sees him as a source of problems soon after his birth, “Little Paul Marvell, from his beautiful pink cradle, was already interfering with his mother’s plans” (125). The narrator’s juxtaposition of the description of a small child in his cradle and the accusation against that child of “interfering” with Undine’s certainly reveals a criticism of the selfish mother.

As Paul grows older, Undine’s affections do not grow stronger. She continues to focus on herself with no regard to the wellbeing of her husband or young son. In a moment of selfishness, Undine forgets her son’s birthday while she spends the day with Peter Van Degan, an elite member of her social circle. As a consequence, she puts out Ralph and his entire family. They wait for her to arrive at length, but are not surprised when she never shows up. The narrator provides insight into the normalcy of this behavior, as Ralph’s sister Laura states: “‘Undine promised she’d have the boy here at four. It’s not as if this has never happened before. She’s always breaking her engagements’” (128). Ralph, in contrast, gives his wife the benefit of the doubt; he arrives at the party confident that his wife and son will be there. He quickly apologizes for and excuses his own lateness, “‘It’s outrageous of me to be so late, and I daren’t look my son in the face! But I stayed down town to make provision for his future birthdays.’ . . . ‘Don’t tell

me the party's over, and the guest of honor gone to bed?" (131). Here, Ralph demonstrates his regret at missing even part of his young son's birthday party; yet, he justifies his lateness with the excuse that he is working to provide for his family through his income. Once he realizes that his wife never arrived, nor dropped off their son, his sister Laura observes his demeanor change completely, "She saw his eyes darken: but he merely gave a slight laugh and drew out his cigarette case . . . He dropped back into his chair with a look of weariness, as if some strong stimulant had suddenly ceased to take effect on him" (132). Ralph is hurt by Undine's actions—or lack thereof—and it is obvious both in his physical and emotional bearing. This is one of many occasions in which the physical and mental toll that Undine takes on Ralph is apparent. Undine's cool reaction to her son's missed birthday celebration is striking in contrast with Ralph's distress. When Ralph confronts Undine about her absence and total disregard for their son and his family, she shows no remorse.

Ralph ingenuously remains committed to Undine in spite of her heartless treatment of him and their son. Undine continues to put a financial strain on Ralph for the remainder of their married life and even after they separate and divorce. After Ralph and Undine split up, she moves to France and extorts money from her ex-husband, using their son as a pawn in her twisted game. Undine technically retains custody of Paul, but she chooses to let him live with Ralph if he does everything that she asks him to do. In order to extort money from Ralph, Undine says that the only way that Paul can stay with Ralph is if the latter pays a large sum of money. The impact that her actions have on her family is tragic. Ralph does all that he can to come up with the money, but ultimately ends up powerless. Ultimately, Ralph's feelings of helplessness prompt him to commit suicide. Prior to his death, Ralph reflects for the last time on his relationship with Undine:

She had lied to him – lied to him from the first ... there hadn't been a moment when she hadn't lied to him, deliberately, ingeniously and inventively. As he thought of it, there came to him, for the first time in months, that overwhelming sense of her physical nearness which had once so haunted and tortured him. Her freshness, her fragrance, the luminous haze of her youth, filled the room with a mocking glory; and he dropped his head on his hands to shut it out ... (295-96)

Undine is, and always has been, a manipulative woman; yet, this side of her was always shielded by her charming “freshness,” “fragrance,” and “haze of youth.” In his last moments, Ralph recognizes that he fooled himself to think that there was anything worthy of his larger aspirations within Undine. Ralph's suicide proves his inescapable disillusionment; the gravity of his feelings is reflected in the fact that he can imagine no way out—other than taking his own life. In reality, Ralph could have escaped his misery if he had used his resources to escape Undine when he first recognized her selfishness, vanity, and materialism. However, he was entrapped by his lingering love for Undine and his naïve belief that a larger nature lingered beneath the surface.

Comparable to *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*, the larger nature does not overcome the meaner nature in *The Custom of the Country*. Although Ralph's suicide resonates with Lily's apparent suicide at the end of *The House of Mirth*, there is a clear distinction: Ralph commits suicide knowingly and intentionally. Lily, in contrast, places her fate outside of her own control; she certainly overdoes, but does not acknowledge the ends that she may meet. With this intentional action, Ralph does not allow himself to remain in Undine's grip's—or under the control of the meaner nature—for a second longer. This is a clear movement away from Ethan in *Ethan Frome*, who subjects himself to a lifetime of despair after his failed suicide attempt with Mattie Silver. While Ralph's life still ends tragically, there is a sense that he is capable of acting

intentionally in a way that none of Wharton's previous larger-natured characters were never capable of doing to free themselves from the meaner nature.

#### **IV. *The Age of Innocence***

*Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life . . . When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite version of all he had missed.*

~ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

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Wharton published her final novel considered here, *The Age of Innocence*, in 1920. The protagonist Newland Archer is the epitome of the larger nature; he is intellectual, sensitive, and guided by aesthetic impulses. His fiancée, May Welland, is the possessor of the meaner nature; she is not guided by aesthetic aspirations like Newland and she is capable of subtle manipulation in order to secure her future. Ellen Olenska, a third protagonist, adds another dimension. She is an embodiment of the larger nature and is unique in Wharton's fiction because she is a strong character. Undoubtedly, this strong larger-natured character is the one that Wharton sympathizes with the most. This complicates earlier arguments that the larger nature is always dominated by the meaner nature; here, Wharton shows that a larger-natured character can prevail when her positive attributes are paired with strength of will.

Newland Archer is the first character introduced in the novel and, like the male protagonists and *Ethan Frome* and *The Custom of the Country*, is clearly represented in terms of the larger nature from the outset. The first image of Newland is his late arrival to New York's opera house to see a performance of *Faust*. The narrator looks at the event from Newland's point

of view throughout. Newland arrives during the garden scene, just as Madame Nilsson sings ‘*M’ama!*’ and enraptures her audience. His justification for his lateness, provide insight into his character,

When Newland Archer opened the door at the back of the club box, the curtain had just gone up on the garden scene. There was no reason why the young man should not have com earlier, for he had dined at seven, alone with his mother and sister, and had lingered afterward over a cigar in the Gothic library . . . The second reason for his delay was a personal one. He had dawdled over his cigar because he was at heart a dilettante and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization. This was especially the case when the pleasure was a delicate one, as his pleasures mostly were; and on this occasion the moment he looked forward to was so rare and exquisite in quality that . . . he could not have entered the Academy at a more significant time than just as she was singing: ‘He loves me—he loves me not—he loves me!’ (3-4)

The diction speaks volumes about Newland here. He “lingers” and “dawdles” over his cigar, savoring what is to come. The narrator also describes him as a “dilettante”—he admires the arts, but has little talent. This pejorative term provides an ironic view of Newland’s character—he tends towards an aesthetic appreciation of the world around him, but he shows no particular capability in that realm. In fact, Newland fulfills a role in society that serves no particular purpose beyond earning money. His frustration with this position is evident in a scene in his office, “He arrived late at the office, perceived that his doing so made no difference to any one, and was filled with sudden exasperation at the elaborate futility of his life” (89). The narrator makes clear, from Newland’s point of view, that Newland’s position in society provides him



with no sense of personal or spiritual fulfillment. For Newland, who demonstrates a “larger” nature in Wharton’s fiction, his life in New York is fruitless. The majority of people are indifferent when it comes to the aesthetics of the world around them; perhaps that is why he so naïve in his judgments of that world.

Connections between Newland and other larger characters are undeniable. Like Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth*, Newland demonstrates a sort of “republic of the spirit.” He does not fit perfectly within the mold of his society, as is evidenced by the narrator’s portrayal of his dissatisfaction in the workplace. At the same time, the diction used to describe Newland’s condition—terms like “exasperation” and “futility”—establish him as a pathetic character; he is aware of the fact that he is unhappy, but demonstrates no energy to change. Looking at matters from his point of view, the narrator does not provide any sense that Newland is capable of escaping or reconstructing his current life. Instead, he seems resigned to accept his dissatisfaction. Thus, like many of the larger-natured characters in previous novels, Newland proves passive in spite of his virtues.

One of Newland’s greatest weaknesses is evident from the outset of the novel. This weakness also resonates with prior characters who possessed the larger nature, especially males—he believes that he can “save” May when, in fact, she proves much stronger than he ever perceived. Initially, Newland’s heart lies with the young and beautiful May Welland. As he gazes at May across the opera house, Newland is struck not only by her physical beauty, but also by the beauty of the moment itself:

Slightly behind these brocaded matrons sat a young girl in white with eyes ecstatically fixed on the stage-lovers. As Madame Nilsson’s ‘*M’ama!*’ thrilled out above the silent house . . . a warm pink mounted to the girl’s cheek, mantled her

brow to the roots of her fair braids, and suffused the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia. She dropped her eyes to the immense bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her knee, and Newland Archer saw her white-gloved finger-tips touch the flowers softly. He drew a breath of satisfied vanity and his eyes returned to the stage. (5)

Of course, this moment reinforces the assertion that Newland is absorbed in aesthetic considerations even in choosing a wife. He perceives May as very pure and innocent. The narrator's reference to Newland's "satisfied vanity" suggests that Newland's interest in May is superficial. Soon after, the narrator reveals that Newland does not think that May understands the seduction scene that is taking place in *Faust*,

'The darling!' thought Newland Archer, his glance flitting to the young girl with the lilies-of-the-valley. 'She doesn't even guess what it's all about. And he contemplated her absorbed young face with a thrill of possession in which pride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity. 'We'll read Faust together ... by the Italian lakes . . . ' he thought, somewhat hazily confusing the scene of his projected honey-moon with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride. (6)

Much like Ralph and Undine in *The Custom of the Country*, Newland clearly believes that his mission in life is to educate May in order to help her become a more mature and sophisticated young woman, which would be clear progress for the innocent "young girl" that he refers to here. This moment reinforces Newland's vanity, especially as it concerns May, but it also reveals his clear sense of superiority to May. As much as he might feel that he loves her, Newland believes

that he will be the dominant figure in their relationship—he will provide his wife with an “education” that will enhance her life, as she will be able to see the world in the manner that Newland does. As the novel progresses, more and more details build up to the point that this moment becomes totally ironic in retrospect. Newland’s idealization of the woman that he creates reflects the Pygmalion myth, in which a sculptor falls in love with his own creation. Newland does not value May for the woman that she is now, he loves her for the woman that he will make her.

Newland perceives May as a sweet, even-tempered, and innocent young woman. Yet the narrator provides glimpses into May’s character that deviate from, or at least complicate, what appears to be true to Newland. A scene in Newport, where Newland and May are on holiday after they have married, reveals the conflict between Newland’s perception of May and the actual nature of her character,

May Welland was just coming out of the tent. In her white dress, with a pale green ribbon about the waist and a wreath of ivy on her hat, she had the same Diana-like aloofness as when she had entered the Beaufort ball-room on the night of her engagement. In the interval not a thought seemed to have passed behind her eyes or a feeling through her heart; and though her husband knew that she had the capacity for both he marvelled afresh at the way in which experience dropped away from her. (147)

Yet again, Newland sees May as a beautiful object; his ideas about her purity and naivety are reinforced on the basis of her appearance and his perception of her thoughts and feelings. Yet, this excerpt is ironic, as the omniscient narrator clearly suggests that other qualities are present in May. The narrator references the goddess Diana who was both a symbol of chastity and a

huntress. Newland sees May only in terms of the former, “chastity”; yet the allusion must be intentional—May reflects the other qualities of Diana as well. The narrator reveals that, while May might embody purity, she also possesses the characteristics of a skilled huntress, as she is capable of thoughtful planning, management, and execution. Wharton reinforces this image with May’s skill in archery. Like the other Wharton heroines—Lily Bart, Zeena Frome, and Undine Spraggs—May is capable of far more than the male protagonist gives her credit for. Her ability to strike her target is metaphorically portrayed through her victory in the archery competition. May proves to be a far stronger character than Newland’s point of view alone conveys. Indeed, May, while a meaner character, is stronger than Newland—the larger, yet weaker character.

The central conflict in *The Age of Innocence* is the love triangle between Newland, May, and Ellen Olenska. Thus, Ellen is a third pertinent character to focus on. Ellen does not fit into the same mold as Newland (larger nature, yet weaker character), nor is she similar to May (meaner nature, yet stronger character). Ellen falls somewhere between the two. She demonstrates kindness, generosity, and a capacity for an aesthetic appreciation of the world around her. Newland perceives all of these flattering attributes in Ellen and he decides to act on an impulsive belief that Ellen is more capable of aesthetic appreciation than his betrothed, “His eye lit on a cluster of yellow roses. He had never seen anything as sun-golden before, and his first impulse was to send them to May instead of the lilies. But they did not look like her—there was something too rich, too strong in their fiery beauty. In a sudden revulsion of mood . . . he wrote the name of the Countess Olenska” (56). In addition to his aesthetic interest, Newland clearly has an erotic interest in Ellen that he does not demonstrate towards May; the Countess can appreciate the “fiery beauty” of the roses, which the pure and simple May would not notice. As he realizes the qualities that Ellen possesses and May lacks, he becomes more and more

attracted to his fiancée's cousin. Newland does not, however, recognize an important attribute that his cousin and his fiancée share—their strength of character. For both women, this power allows them to direct the course of their relationships with Newland.

The relationship between Newland and Ellen can be read as a series of missed opportunities. Newland, in contrast with the women in his life, is incapable of taking decisive action in regards to his relationships. Newland is restricted by his qualities; in fact, he eventually misses out on “the flower of life” on account of his nature (243). That “flower” of course refers to Ellen. While both hold some responsibility for that fact, Newland holds their relationship back the most. This is obvious, at least in an early scene, in which Newland flees from New York rather than responding to Ellen's request to meet with him:

It was not until his return home, after midnight, that he drew Madame Olenska's missive out again and re-read it slowly a number of times. There were several ways of answering it, and he gave a considerable thought to each one during the watches of an agitated night. That on which, when morning came, he finally decided was to pitch some clothes into a portmanteau and jump on board a boat that was leaving that very afternoon for St. Augustine. (99)

Yet again, the narrator presents Newland as too pensive. In this particular case, Newland determines that his best option is cowardice; he leaves with no word to Ellen. The narrator draws attention to the fact that Newland spends an entire “agitated night” wrestling with the decision—only to settle for the path of least resistance. The easy way out—usually the means to avoid any sort of social backlash—becomes the most common route for Newland, although never without a mental and emotional toll. This incident also demonstrates that Ellen is a more active character than Newland; she solicits an opportunity to get together to confront their mutual attraction.

Ellen cannot escape all culpability in their failed relationship. Like Newland, she inhibits their relationship. However, Ellen's hindrance of their romance is distinctive because it is intentional. At one point, Ellen prevents their relationship from moving forward; she speaks decisively against it and even takes specific actions to avert an affair. Her actions demonstrate her strength, in contrast with the weak-willed Newland. Ellen's authority in their relationship is evident in an intimate conversation between them:

'Do you really see me marrying May after this?'

'I don't see you putting that question to May. Do you?'

He gave a reckless shrug, 'It's too late to do anything else.'

'You say that because it's the easiest thing to say at this moment—not because it's true. In reality it's too late to do anything but what we've both decided on.' (121)

While Newland attempts "recklessness" here, the situation is ironic—Newland is a character who rarely, if ever, is reckless. The fact that he gives a "reckless shrug" is very telling—he is a passive character with a tendency to react rather than act. At the same time, Ellen discourages action at this point—she claims that it is too late to change either of their futures. Moments later, in an important turning point, Newland receives a telegram from May proclaiming that her family has approved his request for an earlier marriage. Instead of choosing the more difficult, but perhaps more rewarding route—breaking off his engagement and pursuing Ellen—Newland resigns himself to the marriage with May, and in a crazed manner at that: "'The first week, did you say?' He threw back his head with a long laugh . . . 'Nothing's the matter, except that I'm going to be married in a month'" (124). Newland, like other weak large natures, believes that his fate is inescapable. Newland takes the path of least resistance marries May.

May, in the meantime, attains what she sought all along—she secures Newland in marriage and eliminates any imminent threats to their marriage. May can be almost positive that Newland will not back out of their marriage and absolutely sure that he will not leave her once she is pregnant. It is for this reason that May drops these major bombshells on Newland at pivotal points in the novel. In order to add to affirm her security, May tells Ellen that she is pregnant—before she knows for sure; she confesses this to Newland, “‘No; I wasn’t sure then—but I told her I was. And you see, I was right!’ she exclaimed, her blue eyes wet with victory” (241). This statement of “victory” is extremely significant; the narrator’s diction reveals that May is completely aware of the romance between Newland and Ellen. Thus, the narrator shows May understanding more than Newland and Ellen give her credit for. May knew that she was fighting for Newland’s faithfulness all along; here, she finally feels that she has secured him for the rest of their lives.

Even before May’s confession, the narrator looks at events from Newland’s point of view, and ironically reveals his gradual comprehension of May’s power. This is most clear when he realizes that May and the others in their social circle orchestrated Ellen’s final departure from New York and their inevitable separation. The fact that everyone—and particularly May—was aware of Newland’s near affair with Ellen dawns on him at the end of a farewell dinner for Ellen,

In the drawing room, where they presently joined the ladies, he met May’s triumphant eyes, and read in them the conviction that everything had ‘gone off’ beautifully . . . it became clear to Archer that here also a conspiracy of rehabilitation and obliteration was going on. The silent organization which held his little world together was determined to put itself on record as never for a moment having questioned the propriety of Madame Olenska’s conduct, or the

completeness of Archer's domestic felicity . . . and from this tissue of elaborate mutual dissimulation Archer once more disengaged the fact that New York believed him to be Madame Olenska's lover. He caught the glitter of victory in his wife's eyes, and for the first time understood that she shared the belief. (238)

Again narrator, looking from Newland's point of view, sees looks of "triumph" and "victory" in May's eyes; she is once more the skilled "Diana." May, whom Newland believed that he would need to take under his wing at the start of the novel, proves both her understanding of Newland's and Ellen's relationship and her mental shrewdness—she is, after all, the architect of this "silent organization."

May might be the character who demonstrates a meaner nature, but her single-minded focus on her goal—to secure Newland—yields success by the end of the novel. Newland, on the other hand, continues to live his life passively. He is constantly aware that he has missed out on "the flower of life," the ultimate source of happiness:

Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life. But he thought of it now as something so unattainable and improbable that to have repined would have been like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery. There were a hundred million tickets in *his* lottery, and there was only one prize; the chances had always been decidedly against him. When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite version of all he had missed. (243)

In this passage, the narrator comments on Newland's larger nature once more. He is thoughtful and enjoys dwelling on the past, but he is passive. Unlike May, who is decisive and acts on her wants, Newland is incapable of taking the necessary action. The narrator demonstrates an irony



in Newland's point of view here; Newland believes that "the chances had always been decidedly against" a successful relationship between him and Ellen. Yet, the reality is that Newland was the one who missed any opportunity; he passively accepted his fate.

While Newland is a weak, larger-natured character, Ellen possesses a strong will and larger nature. She makes the honorable decision to end her relationship with her cousin's husband before May is hurt. In this novel, as in all of Wharton's novels considered here, the meaner nature experiences the clearest capability for survival and even success within society. At the same time, though, Ellen proves that the larger nature can also triumph—if only paired with a strong will. Without a doubt, Ellen is amongst Wharton's most sympathetic characters. Thus, in her final work considered here, Wharton created and upheld an ideal: the larger and stronger nature.

## **V. Conclusion**

At first glance, the conclusions of all four novels considered here appear grim. *The House of Mirth* ends with Lily Bart's death by overdose. Ethan Frome falls into a life of a misery with his manipulative, evil wife Zeena and his crippled lover Mattie Silver. Ralph Marvell does not even make it to the conclusion of *The Custom of the Country*— after suffering Undine's exploitation and deceit, he commits suicide by the middle of the novel. In *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer resigns himself to conventionality, realizing that he has missed the "flower of life" with Ellen Olenska (243). However, Ellen Olenska must be considered in her own right. While Wharton does not let her readers see Ellen again after her decision to end her affair with Newland and return to Europe, we know that Ellen has at least been capable of doing

something that no other “larger nature” has done: she has overcome the meaner nature, without taking her life or confining herself to misery.

My bookend novels, *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, are more complicated considerations of the larger and meaner natures than the central novels, *Ethan Frome* and *The Custom of the Country*. In the latter novels, Wharton’s characters can clearly be labeled either “larger”—Ethan and Ralph—or “meaner”—Zeena and Undine. In the bookend novels, the distinction is more complex. Lily is characterized by the tension between the larger and meaner natures within her. While Newland and Ellen represent the larger nature, May’s meaner nature is justifiable; she seeks personal security, but does not demonstrate the restless ambition or materialism of an Undine. Thus, the final novel presents a new meaner nature: conformity to social conventions. While May is a part of that society, she is also a product of it; the “villain” is the system itself.

*House of Mirth* and *Age of Innocence* are examples of the harsh realism that critic Blake Nevius identified in his body of work. Rather than simply letting her readers believe that people are either larger or meaner-natured, as she does in her *Ethan Frome* and *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton strikes at two chilling truths. First, people, like Lily Bart, are constantly suffering from a tension between the larger and meaner nature with themselves; and, ultimately, people with characteristics like selfishness, ambition, and vanity—to name a few—will dominate those with magnanimity and thoughtfulness. Second, society itself is defined by a meaner nature; thus, realistically only the meanest people in society will survive and thrive.

This grim outlook pervades *The House of Mirth*. Even with a heroic act of magnanimity, Lily cannot end her downward spiral. As Lily attempts to climb the social ladder, she subjects herself to the meaner society. In that realm, selfish and cruel characters like Bertha Dorset are the

most successful because they will do anything to preserve their own status. Therefore, Lily's magnanimity proves a weakness in coping with her society. Ultimately, she believes that a heavy dose of sleeping medicine, albeit an ambiguous suicide attempt, is her only escape from the meaner world. Overcome by the meanness of society, Lily does not have the strength to continue her fight on higher ground.

*The Age of Innocence* also asserts that society is marked by meanness, but the outlook is not so grim as in *The House of Mirth*. While Lily's attempts to embrace the larger nature and rise above her meaner society prove futile, Ellen proves that the larger nature should not always be dismissed as weak. Ellen possesses strength that none of Wharton's other larger-natured characters demonstrate. More specifically, Ellen is capable of making decisions and taking action without compromising her larger nature; she is able to survive conditions that other "larger natures" cannot.

Ellen's distinct strength is most evident when she decides to leave Newland, her "flower of life," and New York City to return to Europe. This move effectively ends her blossoming romance with Newland, which was apparent but never acted upon by either of them. Ellen's decision is founded in her nobility and integrity; she does not wish to ruin the marriage between Newland and her cousin May, especially once she discovers that they are expecting a child.

With Ellen's great sacrifice in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton creates a possibility that does not exist in her other three novels considered here: the magnanimous, noble, and self-sacrificing larger nature can overcome the meanness of society. While the "Ellen Olenskas" that possess and refuse to compromise these attributes may be rare, especially in Wharton's fiction, they do exist. Ellen not only survives the meaner nature, she is a character who readers can admire. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton produced a heroine unrivaled in her earlier fiction.

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