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Forging Female Tradition

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ABSTRACT

This study is conducted to analyze the main theme and character of the heroine of Wharton's custom of the country novel. The psychoanalytical approach to her protagonist and theme can greatly reflect the feelings of the women of Wharton's society and time. References to feminism will be used as a mean of supporting her views regarding problems facing such women in the society when confronting the prevalent traditions of the time. Though not a radical feminist, Wharton always confronts barriers of class, gender in her writings. She successfully pictures the nineteenth ambitious woman and her limited chances to be on her own through depicting the female quest for distinction and social prestige. Such a woman can be considered as a representation of the nineteenth century female struggle to rime with the social codes of the nineteenth century American traditions and conventions even as she sacrifices her emotional life so as to succeed and occupy a niche in society. Her novels offer a view that is women, as members of society, have distinctively feminine traits which have a rightful and beneficial place and function in the social fabric when respected and not exploited, commercialized or belittled. Whichever way one may look at them the fact is that their individuality as also their humanity remains ignored and marginalized.

Key words: Female, feminine traits, tradition, society, forging, emotions, rights

INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) according to Joslin (1991) is highly evaluated as a major figure of American literature. She believes that the twentieth century is the age of the new woman. Her work criticizes her society's custom and its limitations towards women. The woman in her manifests in her fictional world where she is preoccupied with women and their problems. She discusses the nature, role and status of women. Feminists like Ammons, Cathy Davidson and Judith P. Saunders, among others, celebrate her feminist views and emphasize the feminist themes in her literary productions.

It is not only feminist critics that have been drawn to Wharton's feminist writings but also critics from other schools: Psychoanalysis and new historicism have shown varied reactions towards Wharton's literary production, thus inspiring researchers to examine Wharton's literary characters, themes and motifs. Consequently, the reader of Wharton can gain deeper insights into her literary works.

As a woman, Wharton was sensitive to the way the woman was treated, since she herself suffered in her own life for having been born a woman. As Kapoor (2004) says: She was forced to make an unsuitable marriage at the age of twenty three to ward off the social stigma of the unmarried girl in addition to her literary aspirations being ridiculed and she herself being denied the formal education her brothers had received and she was virtually content with an unfair share in her mother's will. Thus she winds up her novels by harking back to the ideal social order of which the given fictional milieus are established as perversions.

Wharton's novels propose the women as Kapoor (2004) continues to state: As members of society have, distinctively feminine traits which have a rightful and beneficial place and function in the social fabric when respected and not exploited, commercialized or belittled. Whichever way one may look at them the fact is that their individuality as also their humanity, remains ignored and marginalized.

Besides, social customs stop them from cultivating themselves intellectually. The woman issue occupied her and she is considered one of the famous feminists. As Jessup (1965) observes: Feminism is an expression of women's desire to be herself. Feminism has engaged members of its own sex and none more successfully than Wharton (1991).

Therefore, Edith Wharton sets out to correct the female image as presented in the domestic novel. She stresses the social bond on both male and female: The social bond is made up of two opposite forces, the bond that restricts the individual and the one that unites them in common effort. Unlike novelists who celebrated domesticity, Wharton presented the bonds or restrictions imposed on the Individual (Joslin, 1991).

Hence, the focus of this study was to analyze the main theme and heroine of Wharton's custom of the country novel published in 1913. The psychoanalytical approach to her protagonist and theme reflect the feelings of the women of Wharton's society and time. References to feminism are used as a means of supporting her views regarding problems facing such women in the society when confronting the prevalent traditions of the time. Though not a radical feminist, Wharton always confronts barriers of class and gender in her writings. She successfully pictures the nineteenth century ambitious woman and her limited chances to be on her own through depicting the female quest for distinction and social prestige. Such a woman can be considered as a representation of the nineteenth century female struggle to rime with the social codes of the nineteenth century American traditions and conventions even as she sacrifices her emotional life so as to succeed and occupy a niche in the upper-class New York society.

Wharton writes from life and ridicules her society, criticizing the woman's prevailing life-style. Flanner (1929) sees in Wharton's literary representation of women a close relationship with her old New York society: As a talented pioneer of a professionalism among the domestic women of her class, absolution might have come with the dignity of her fame, had not Mrs. Wharton discovered her sinful skill at sketching from life. Many of her contemporaries felt they had unconsciously sat across the space of years for too many of her portraits.

Wharton's presentation and characterization of her female protagonist are based on real life people and that emphasizes also the social norms and traditions of that time and the realistic presentation of the woman's struggle to be. Her work is a reflection of her own personal interactions to relationships she incurred throughout her life. She expresses her views about life, people and places in a manner that is inspired by thoughts of some women's personal struggles with custom and her own. Edith Wharton specifically addresses their presence and roles in society with reference to the region and the social environment she herself experienced.

The American society was not fair towards women from the beginning, as Welch (1920) asserts: The American society, to which Edith Wharton herself belonged, did not give equality to women in legal, economic and sexual matters. Every aspect of American culture conspired to foster such an unequal treatment. The early puritan settlers gave spiritual equality to their women but having done so used this as an additional handle to deny them justice in matters temporal. The Southern planters evolved a complex code of chivalry which, in the ultimate analysis, was a suitable method of giving women an inferior role while ostensibly elevating their status.

In custom of the country, Undine Sprague is the central character. She is newly arrived in New York. Her family has come into money through business in the Midwest and now she seeks to use that money to buy social position in fashionable Eastern society. She accomplishes this through marriage to a young man, Ralph Marvell, with social connections but not much money. Before her wedding, Undine encounters an acquaintance from Apex named Elmer Moffatt. Undine begs him not to do anything that will endanger her wedding to Ralph; Elmer agrees. Then after some time and a visit to Europe, she realizes that her marriage did not really fulfill her dream and that there are still some fashionable and upper class people. Undine's dissatisfaction leads her into an affair with Peter Van Degen, who is married to Ralph's cousin, Clare. Despite having a child now, she divorces her husband, Ralph, in the hopes of marrying Peter but this does not work out. As a divorcee, Undine loses her high position in society. In Paris, a French count, Raymond de Chelle, falls in love with Undine and they get married. Unfortunately she finds this less than what she bargained for. Undine is soon dissatisfied with Raymond, too: she does not like the strict customs of upper-class French society and resents having to spend most of her time in the country. She divorces Raymond in order to marry Elmer Moffatt, her ex husband, who by now has made a fortune and with whom she had developed as a result of a love affair but was forced by her parents to divorce him after 2 weeks of marriage. But now, married to Elmer for good, Undine finally has everything she ever desired. Still, it is clear that she wants even more: in the last paragraph of the novel, she imagines what it would be like to be an Ambassador's wife something that she will never experience, because divorcees could never be ambassadors' wives at that time.

This novel appeared in the year of Edith Wharton's divorce and it demonstrates that she knows exactly how painful a bad marriage can be also it illustrates the impact of divorce on Woman's life.

Wharton depicts Undine as a successful woman according to the custom of her country as described by Goodman (1990). She rises in New York and European societies by using marriage as the passport to happiness. But how could this be achieved when there is always something better beyond? Undine's motto is beyond; there was something still better beyond, then-more luxurious, more exciting, more worthy of her!. Though Undine is smart and capable of being successful, the social norm entraps her in the marriage web where she can climb to reach beyond what others of her class have accomplished. Wharton's protagonist attempts to achieve her desires but her awareness of the reservations of her society towards women's emancipation makes her depend on the marriage institution to reach her goals. The woman is often kept in a state of tutelage and regarded as a property. The female's capital is her body and beauty and the man considers the woman as his proud possession. As Montgomery (1971) remarks: Women began to be regarded as decorative playthings as dolls and idols.

The woman should also be attractive and playful enough for the man to want her, while showing a reticence and resistance which can gratify his sense of conquest or the instinct of possession. Dimock (2003) put her remarks on this point that Wharton sees marriage as the marketable asset for women within the construct of a capitalist society.

Nevertheless, man is scarcely viewed as the cruel perpetrator of evil. The male character is presented as the husband, father or lover who is part of the woman's life. The male figure is somehow connected to the social bonds that limit the movements of the female and create awareness of her limitations whether of spirit or physique.

Undine's life, as the forgoing pages have shown, is affected by three men who provide the initiative for her quest for prestige and power. Yet at the end of the story Undine becomes rich and a well known social figure but she is denied the prestige of an ambassador's wife, a fact that makes

Undine miserable. She is forced to accept the roles assigned to her by a male-oriented social order if she wishes to exist in harmony with her society.

In Wharton's world, women have no male others to whom they can relate. The men are usually distant or absent. They offer no dialogic otherness or even the potential of such dialogue. In this novel there is an important conversation between Charles Bowen and Mrs. Fairford where two distinctive spheres for gender in America are outlined: The woman belongs to the domestic sphere while the man belongs firmly in the professional sphere: Where does the real life of most American men lie? In some women's drawing room or in their {own}offices? The answer's obvious, isn't? The emotional center of gravity's not the same in the two hemispheres. In America the real crime passionnel is a big steal and there is more excitement in wrecking railway than homes.

If the real excitement is in the business world then men will defiantly be away from women and women are shut out of their men's lives. As a result women suffer from solitude which leads to a miserable life for them as is the case with Undine and Ralph. Ironically, the speaker of the above text is a male character, Charles Bowen, who is explaining a version of the social theory to a woman in their discussion of the problem of American marriages. A male tells the story to a female, probably, because a male is privy to male attitudes and manners. Women in this system are portrayed as naïve, infantilized by their inferior social position separate from the sphere of adult male responsibility (Joslin, 1991).

Therefore, the woman does not exist in the male passion for business and his companionship in the homosocial world of male competition. As a result the woman never understands the nature or extent of her responsibility in the marriage. What happens is that a male chooses a female to expose his wealth; the woman becomes in a sense, a little more than a property. The man does not endow her with the information that enables her to be an equal partner, nor does he care about her interests in life. This situation is echoed in Joslin (1991) words about the view of woman as a second class in society: The material luxuries given to women in exchange for the silent acceptance of their secondary social position amount to a big bribe. This causes a social imbalance between men and women. The woman is not given the chance to develop to maturity her powers of intellect, rationality or imagination. In order to survive socially she must use her beauty and sexuality to attract a wealthy man so he can provide her a place in society.

It is apparent that Undine Spragg who hopes to better her life in purely socio-economic terms gains that through the business of marriage. She deals with marriage as a business because it is her only possible way to climb the social ladder. Welch (1920) observed this quality in Undine and reflects on it as a way for a woman to escape entrapment: Significantly, though, in order for her (Wharton, 1991) to break a woman free of entrapment, Wharton must endow Undine with so-called masculine qualities. One wonders if Wharton had not taken the lengths to shape Undine into more of a man, if Undine would be able to truly escape some of her circumstances. Business-like mentality is apparent in Undine's initial sense of loss at the unexpected news of her second husband's death which gradually is replaced by a sense of relief from a suffocating financial problem. Ralph's death is a solution to go on with her marriage plan from the French count which will grant her an aristocratic title and that will add also to her social position.

But this business-like woman is not always successful; she becomes fully imprisoned by the aristocratic French custom in her third marriage which was for the sake of the aristocratic title, stuck in a marriage where she has no control over and she is rarely allowed to leave the family state. That life does not suit Undine whose game is society and glamour. Undine finds that marriage does not fulfill her dream of happiness and so becomes suffocated more and more, as the

days passed, she felt herself in grasp of circumstances stronger than any effort she could? Oppose to them. The very absence of external pressure, of any tactless assertion of authority on her husband's part, intensified the sense of helplessness.

Her society taught her to display herself as the glamorous wife whose role is to exhibit her husband's wealth.

However, Undine knows her goals well and, as this marriage proves to be a lost case, she gets divorced. In contrast to Undine, Clare, Ralph's cousin is married to a nouveau riche Peter Van Degan. Clare is dedicated to her children and family and represents the typical wife who knows about her husband's affairs but she keeps silent. She is miserable and does not take any action to restore either her husband or her dignity. Undine, unlike her, is an example of a woman who is bent on fulfilling her complete social and financial potential.

Wharton's custom of the country suggests that she believes the demands of family and marriage to be diametrically opposed to a woman's achieving her own potential selfhood. Therefore, Undine is seen in conflict with her life as a married woman with unfulfilled feelings, either with Ralph who spends most of his time at work to meet Undine's materialistic demands and or the French count, who escapes to other women since he finds that Undine's intellect is not his match. This attitude is quite in contrast with the accepted norms of womanhood of that time. Wharton uses existing rules and beliefs to present her female character as enslaved being in a constructing social order. The frustration and resentment of the protagonist are apparent consequences of a stifling society where individual rights are restricted.

The novel focuses on the helpless female who must be saved from her wretched condition by the rescuing male. The first male here is Ralph who longs to elevate Undine to his social class and this longing is what Undine is really keen on because it is her only way to mingle with the elite of New York. Much of the appeal that holds Undine to the aristocratic leisurely Ralf is the fact that he is her only hope to belong to this class and he displays the typical male attitude of improving and dominating the woman: And the girl's very sensitiveness to new impressions, combined with her obvious lack of any sense of relative values, would make her an easy prey to the powers of folly. He seemed to see her... like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster society careening up to make a mouthful of her and himself whirling down to cut her bonds.

He wants to make her his own wife and he believes he would be able to awaken Undine to better impulses and appreciation of his passion for art. When he proposes to her, she only thinks of his proposal as a way to climb the social ladder. Undine finds in the customs and marriage current in her time the route to prosperity and she should make the best of it. No one can blame Undine for searching for the best; the society entraps women in its tradition and manners as Joslin (1991) says: The bond between individual and the social group, the web of customs, manners, culture, lies at the heart of Edith Wharton's fiction. Her novels depict individuals enmeshed in what she metaphorically called the social web or net, an elaborate weave of manners, mores, rituals, expectations, gestures as well as physical environment.

Undine understood that early and worked on moving from one marriage to another in her search to secure her social and financial status.

The idea that marriage is only suitable when it promises personal freedom and wealth along with other attributes of being a wife and a mother is of major interest in custom of the country. Also the idea of the self-sacrificing daughter is present in the way Undine, by her father's orders is forced to break up her first marriage from Moffat who throughout the novel's events proved to be the suitable man for her. Her father's orders recall the concept of male domination in a patriarchal

society where the woman surrenders to her society. Ironically, Undine makes use of this sacrifice to her own benefit and uses it to practice pressure on her father. Unlike Lily, another Wharton's protagonist, in *The House of Mirth* who tries hard to free herself from the restrictive mores of society, Undine exposes the horror within society with a total sense of freedom and gay abandonment. For her, every body is there to fulfill her plan of success; a father is only a check-book, a husband a means of social advancement, a baby a threat to the figure. Undine too confronts the same elements that destroy Lily, a materialistic society governed by money which makes women ornamental and dehumanizes them by grudging them any independence as Gilman (1898) says: Wealth, power, social distinction, fame-not only these but home and happiness, reputation, ease and pleasure, her bread and butter-all, must come to her through a small gold ring quoted in Ammons (1980).

Undine Spragg abuses these very elements and uses them as mediums for securing her position in the social world. To gain her goals no moral scruples would prevent her. It is obvious that Wharton is very critical of the American way of life that ignored the personality of woman and relegated her to the pleasures of dressing and going to parties (Kapoor, 2004).

However, even when Wharton allows Undine a successful and happy ending of marrying the business tycoon Mofatt, her first love and the man who is capable now of providing her with everything, the reader senses that Wharton continues to bring one more womanly painful issue that is not fair for her as a member of the society. Undine will never be happy because of the custom applied to divorced women. The final lines of the novel reveal that Undine has not broken free from the custom's limitations: But under all the dazzle a tiny black cloud remained. She learned there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador's wife and as she advanced to welcome her first guest she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for real life incidents echo this fictional event though a bit different. The reader recalls the abdication of Sir Edward of England from throne so he can marry the divorced Mrs. Simpson.

The custom of the country attempts to shed light on the assigned role for the woman. Undine in order to succeed commits the most atrocious moral acts in order to achieve her so-called success-but even that success feels suffocating (Welch, 1920). The theme of women's social limitations throughout. The custom of the country defines the suffocating patriarchal power over the nineteenth century woman. The novel tests the woman's limits trying to extend them the peculiar form of tension in her (Wharton) stories can be traced to her effort to meditate between desire and circumstances between individual freedom and responsibility (Nevius, 1956). She thinks that Wharton's work is defined by her endless endeavor to understand the position of the woman within the limitation of the society and that a tension exists in her work between the woman's freedom and success and social custom.

Wharton makes her heroine the subject of what is supposedly to be a male-centered world. She undermines patriarchy by endowing the woman with an individual identity and a sense of the self. Her novel encompasses the problems of the American woman and reveals her feminism as she discusses the woman's status in society or her relationship with the man as McDowell (1974) says: Edith Wharton concentrates upon the aspirations of women and reflects in a variety of situations the deprivations peculiarly theirs. Because of her sympathy with her women characters and her insight into their lives, she reveals an implicit feminism as they relate, ordinarily at some advantages, to individual men or to a society which men control and dominate.

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