

Lords and Chattel: Men and Women in Edith Wharton's Novels

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In the patriarchal society of Old New York, the nearly extinct world that Edith Wharton reconstructed in her novels with anthropological dedication, women occupied a position of definite inferiority. Thus it is not surprising that the basic relationship that existed between the sexes can best be described as one of domination and subordination, in which a strong, enslaving element and a weak, servile one are joined in mutual dependence. The woman depends on the man for everything, but she is also necessary because if someone is going to command, logically there must be another who obeys. As will be shown, men in Wharton's fiction are represented as lords, while women are seen as chattel or objects. The relationship of domination/subordination will be seen in several areas, as well as in its involvement with the concepts of sadism and masochism. The reasons for accepting an ascendancy which at times borders on domestic despotism vary from an original physical weakness to brain-washing, and to the lack of other alternatives for survival. Finally, we shall consider how the subordination of women in Wharton's novelistic world is closely related to even more obvious forms of slavery; and the pessimism inherent in her writing is a direct result of her vision of the virtual impossibility of woman's escape from male bondage.

The masculine characters in Wharton's novels are often presented as lords. The only variation in their personality has to do with the way they treat their female vassals: with benevolence or with a lack of concern that comes close to scorn. But the man is always the lord. Wharton makes this clear throughout her fiction. In *The Age of Innocence* we see how the destruction of the woman's virginity is the «lordly pleasure» of the male, and in *The Fruit of the Tree* the novelist makes frequent use of the word «lord». For example, when Amherst thinks about Bessy at first it is with the conviction that she

«would abound in the adaptabilities and pliances which the lords of the earth have seen fit to cultivate in their companions»¹. As he becomes acquainted with Justine, Amherst discovers that women are also able to think: «this discovery had the effect of making him discard his former summary conception of woman as a bundle of inconsequent impulses and admit her at a stroke to full mental equality with her lord» (p. 559). However, he still conceives of himself as the lord, the dominant element which will later reject Justine's attempt to make an independent decision; the lord, by definition, needs to subdue. When Amherst learns that she has acted on her own in giving the fatal dose of morphine to the agonizing Bessy, he feels that she has gone too far. Since she did not act like a voluntary subordinate who contentedly depends on her lord, Justine is obliged to accept the status of imposed subordination, losing all her rights by having dared to invade the domains normally reserved for the lord.

The economist Thorstein Veblen, writing in and of Wharton's age, explains the origin of the manorial attitude within the matrimonial relationship. A lord can be defined as «the owner of something or he who has dominion over someone or something», and thus it was that in the barbarian ages women of enemy tribes were taken prisoner to be used as trophies and considered as a possession. In this way there developed, according to Veblen,

on the one hand a form of marriage resting on coercion, and on the other, the custom of ownership. The two institutions are not distinguishable in the initial phase of their development; both arise from the desire of the successful men to put their prowess in evidence by exhibiting some durable result of their exploits².

Veblen considers that the relationship has not changed very much by the nineteenth century. For the man, a woman «still quite unmistakably remains his chattel in theory; for the habitual rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption is the abiding mark of the unfree servant»³. So strongly rooted is this attitude in the world of Wharton that it extends not only to women outside the original family nucleus (prospective fiancées, for example) but also to their own daughters; the fathers of several feminine characters actually encourage deficiencies in their own flesh and blood. According to Elizabeth Ammons, it is the father of Bessy Westmore who «encourages her frivolity and denigrates her ability to think or act maturely» and, referring to the male progenitors of Bessy, Undine Spragg and May Welland, Ammons considers that

1 Edith. Wharton, *The Fruit of the Tree*, New York, Scribners, 1907, p. 179.

2 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1979, pp. 23-4.

3 Veblen, p. 83.

it is no accident that these fathers are completely pleased with their limited daughters. For these paternal opinions symbolize on the personal level the patriarchal structure of American society, which Wharton shows is the source of woman's problems⁴.

In the relationship between men and women, the word «chattel» clearly indicates just how far the woman is dominated by the male. Even more than a servant or a vassal of the lord, she is his possession, his property, like a cow, a vehicle or a vase. Considering her as something he possesses, like an object, he brings her to the lowest stage of dehumanization. In Wharton's novels we often see the woman as an object. In *The Age of Innocence* at first Newland Archer enjoys the idea of «possessing» the purity and innocence that he attributes to May Welland. Several times we see him considering her «his» possessive pronoun. Even when doubts about the possibility of achieving happiness with May had begun to assail him, as he contemplated the admiration that she caused at the archery contest, «Archer felt the glow of proprietorship that so often cheated him into momentary well-being»⁵. This idea of the woman as possession is likewise seen in *The Custom of the Country*. Elmer Moffatt, as a newcomer in New York society, reflects in an exaggerated manner the values of the world he is trying to enter. When Undine asks him if he doesn't plan to marry, he answers: «Why, I shouldn't wonder—one of these days. Millionaires always collect something: but I've got to collect my millions first»⁶. And later we see Undine among the tapestries, oriental vases and paintings that he has purchased, showing to the world, as they do, the wealth of their owner.

However, it is in *The House of Mirth* where we see most clearly how the woman can become so dominated, if not by a particular man, by the whole patriarchal system, that she is turned into an object. Even Selden with all his empty words about the «republic of the spirit» thinks of Lily Bart in terms of an object. He reflects that

she must have cost a good 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. Yet that analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high

4 Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, Athens, Georgia, The University of Georgia Press, 1980, p. 53.

5 Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* in *The Edith Wharton Omnibus*, New York, Scribners, 1978, p. 162.

6 Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, New York, Scribners, 1956, p. 419.

finish; and was it not possible that the material, was fine but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape⁷?

Like Selden, Simon Rosedale, the nouveau riche Jew, feels attracted to Lily, but he does not see her as a human being either. He values her air of rarity, «as though he were a collector who had learned to distinguish minor differences of design and quality in some long coveted object» (p. 310).

Lily does not react to the objectification of her nature. Perhaps she is not pleased with it, but her mother has educated her to use her beauty as a commodity and so she herself accepts this dehumanization and, in her need, even encourages it. When she plans to trap a dull young millionaire, she intends to be «the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it» (p. 53). And after several setbacks in the world of frivolity and wealth which both attracts and disgusts her, she feels like «an expensive toy» (p. 251).

There are certain aspects of a woman's life in which one especially notices male domination. One of these is money. In *False Dawn* Wharton paints a masterly portrait of patriarchal authority in the figure of Mr. Raycie. We know that nearly all the money in the family originally belonged to his wife, but she has lost all control over what was hers:

Mr. Raycie, the day after his marriage, had quietly taken over the management of his wife's property and deducted from the very moderate allowance he accorded her all her personal expenses, even to the postage stamps she used, and the dollar she put in the plate every Sunday⁸.

In *The Custom of the Country* Undine Spragg believes at first that she dominates Raymond de Chelles, her second husband, but little by little she realizes that her marriage to him has limited her own independence. She does not influence him at all, surrounded as he is by an armor of family, tradition, custom, which is not penetrable even by love. What particularly bothers Undine is the authority he expects to hold over her social life:

She had never before been called upon to account to anyone for the use of her time, and after the first amused surprise at Raymond's always wanting to know where she had been and who she had seen, she began to be oppressed by so exacting a devotion... It was therefore disconcerting to find that Raymond expected her to choose her

⁷ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, New York, Signet-New American Library, 1964, p. 7.

⁸ Edith Wharton, *False Dawn* in *The Edith Wharton Omnibus*, New York, Scribners, 1978, p. 385.

friends, and even her acquaintances, in conformity not only with his personal tastes but with a definite and complicated code of family prejudices and traditions (p. 481).

Another area in which man was especially interested in establishing his domination is, of course, sex. The Victorian attitude towards sexual pleasure for women is well-known. The critic Elizabeth Janeway summarizes it: «Victorian women... were expected to be frigid... Frigid submission removed the need for Victorian husbands to worry about pleasing their wives and reduced them to dolls whose demands could be ignored»⁹. And not only was frigidity in women considered normal, the woman who enjoyed sexual activity was persecuted and, during Wharton's time in England and the United States, removal of the ovaries and various veritable tortures were considered therapy for sexual appetite in the woman.

As we might expect, in Wharton's fiction the sexual relationship is seen in terms of strong man/weak woman. Gus Trenor in *The House of Mirth* had lent a large sum of money to Lily, implying that it came from dividends on some money she had asked him to invest for her. When he comes to collect in another coin, she tells him she didn't know she owed him money. He reassures her: «'You're welcome to all of it and ten times more. I'n only asking for a word of thanks from you'. He was closer still, with a hand that grew formidable; and the frightened self in her was dragging the other down» (p. 154). The impending rape is avoided only by her humiliating him and thus releasing the brakes of tradition and social refinement.

In *The Reef* Anna Leath does not dare to give rein to her sexual attraction towards Darrow. She is what envious mothers consider «a model of lady-like repression», and when she feels passion burning within her, she is incapable of responding freely. She sees herself as a «slave» of love, or of the dominant man, which here is the same thing. Darrow also has the dominant role in his contact with Sophy Viner, who represents the new woman, while Anna is part of the old aristocratic stock. But the fate of both of them is similar: to suffer man's domination.

In the relationship between Undine Spragg and her French husband, Ammons discovers another aspect of that domination in sex: «Compounding Undine's misery is Raymond's loss of interest in her because she will not acquiesce in his will... she cannot carry off the role of submissive wife—for which she is ingeniously punished by Raymond's refusing to sleep with her»¹¹. Undine is in no way a model that Wharton is holding up for women;

⁹ Elizabeth Janeway, *Man's World, Woman's Place*, New York, Dell Publishing Co., 1971, p. 116.

¹⁰ This topic is dealt with in Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English's *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women*, London, Pluto Press.

¹¹ Ammons, p. 117.

but, considering the circumstances that surrounded her in that marriage, one is not surprised at her decision to leave behind all that boredom, tradition for tradition's sake, and ancestral dust.

Like Undine, there are other women in Wharton who do not content themselves with being victims in the area of sexual relations. Lizzie Hazelden in *New Year's Day* uses sex herself to control a man and get out of him what she desperately needs. Yet these few examples of women who in some way resist subjugation do not carry much weight in Wharton's fiction.

A concept that is often related to the domination of one person over another is sadism. A certain type of abnormal personality finds it agreeable to inflict suffering upon another, thus showing a capacity for domination. One of the male characters in Wharton who most plainly illustrates this tendency is Mr. Ramy, who appears in one of her first works, *The Bunner Sisters*. Totally without scruples, he carries on a relationship with Ann Elisa and Eveline which leads to the destruction of the two sisters. Although the writer does not tell us explicitly that Ramy received pleasure out of the harm he inflicted, there are sadistic implications in his behavior.

Sadism is frequently related to sex. In fact, in the origin of the word and even in its popularization by Freud, sadism was defined strictly in terms of sexual perversion, only later extending itself semantically to cover any pleasure produced by provoking pain. In *The Age of Innocence* Wharton recognizes the existence of this traditional sadism in the reflections that Newland Archer makes about his society in which the purity and innocence of a young girl were maintained for what can only be called the sadistic pleasure of the man: «in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow» (p. 37). Newland reaffirms the relation that Veblen draws between the primitive societies and the supposedly sophisticated world of the nineteenth-century wealthy when he recognizes the likeness between the rites of betrothal in New York and those of the primitive tribes in which «the savage bride is dragged with shrieks from her parents' tent» (p. 137). There is no doubt that Wharton associates the sexual relationship with violence done to women by men.

The novelist's juxtaposition of the primitive and the nineteenth-century «civilized» societies is no coincidence. Interest in anthropology was beginning to be common. Veblen reflects this interest, as did the novelist in an overtly anthropological treatment of Old New York in works such as *The Age of Innocence* and *The Custom of the Country*. Janeway describes certain aspects of the present-day matrimonial relationships in the Marri tribe of Baluqistan, «so eerily reminiscent of nineteenth-century petit bourgeois attitudes»¹². The treatment of women in this tribe is only one step away from sadism. The husband scorns his wife totally, and she hates him; the feeling of love can

¹² Janeway, p. 206.

only exist outside of marriage. «The husband's power has grown so great that it is self-defeating. How can one love a creature that one owns?... She has nothing to give because everything has been taken from her»¹³.

The conscious avoidance of a woman's happiness is not far from taking pleasure in her suffering. Wharton gives us an example of this in the relationship between Mr. Raycie and his wife in *False Dawn*. Although he boasted of his respect for his wife (something easy to do), «no one had ever been quite sure that he made Mrs. Raycie happy» (p. 372). We understand that exactly the opposite happened, especially when we remember how upon her marriage she, like the Marri wife, lost all right to exercise the most insignificant control over her possessions and even over her own behavior.

The character in Wharton's fiction that is most directly connected with sadism is, oddly enough, not a man but a woman, the wife in *Ethan Frome*. Ethan had married Zeena almost out of family obligation, but she turned out to be as cold and barren as the land she lived on. Time and perhaps the influence of that inhospitable land accentuated her bitter, disagreeable personality. When she notices that a feeling of love toward Mattie, her young cousin, is growing in Ethan, she turns the girl out, knowing full well that she has absolutely nowhere to go and no way to make a living. For Ethan this is the height of evil, and he asks himself: «Must he wear out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman? Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance», realizing that «the only pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him»¹⁴. When Ethan and Mattie are crippled after their frustrated suicide attempt, Zeena, who had been too ill even to take care of herself, finds the strength to care for the two near-invalids. It is as if the suffering of others had given her vital energy.

If Wharton condemns sadism, she also criticizes masochistic behavior. At the bottom of a masochistic character lies a lack of normal self-affirmation, a belief in the inferiority of the self. The novelist constantly attacks such attitudes in her work, perhaps in part because she attained her own self-affirmation only after many doubts and internal struggles. She felt trapped in her union with Teddy Wharton, recurring with frequency to the metaphor of the prison to explain her feelings regarding her marriage. Nevertheless, her personal rebellion against the prejudices of her age and, above all, of her environment, was carried out only after great turmoil. At the time she was writing *Ethan Frome*, in which she shows the stupidity and even the danger of running away from self-affirmation. As we read the novel, we see that Zeena is a terrible woman who does not deserve to have a man as fine as Ethan at her side. We

¹³ Janeway, pp. 207-8.

¹⁴ Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome in The Edith Wharton Omnibus*, New York, Scribners, 1978, p. 340.

know that if he does not leave her, another woman, much nobler, will be doomed to a cruel fate. We would not judge him morally blameworthy if he left Zeena. He himself knows that he should, and yet he cannot make his will prevail. We are almost led to ask whether he likes to suffer. Wharton does not present him exactly as a masochist, but her message is that those who are too weak to affirm themselves are destined to suffer, a message that she no doubt applied to her own situation. Her biographer R. W. B. Lewis notes this autobiographical element: «*Ethan Frome* portrays her personal situation, as she had come to appraise it, carried to a far extreme, transplanted to a remote rural scene, and rendered utterly hopeless by circumstance»¹⁵.

In *Sanctuary*, a novel of her first period, Ammons considers that Wharton has shown a case of «feminine self-sacrifice gone berserk», citing the summary that Louis Auchincloss makes of the novel: «Kate Peyton marries a cheat and a liar in order to become the mother of a moral defective whom he might otherwise sire upon a woman less capable of raising such offspring»¹⁶. As with the case of Frome, Wharton is speaking here of the stupidity of useless self-sacrifice, something that smells of masochism.

With great frequency Wharton paints portraits of women who unquestioningly accept total subordination to a man, even though this may go against their own interests and emotional needs. Without a doubt the origin of the domination of men over women can be found in the fact of superior masculine physical force. By Wharton's time, at least in her circle, no man would have admitted using brute force with another man or even with a woman. We remember how Gus Trenor felt the urge to take Lily by force but the superficial layer of tradition that covered the primitive being held him back. However, the varnish of civilization has not changed the essence of things; the domination has only become more subtle. And if we move a little bit away from the polished world of the New York of the 400, we can still find man's superior force imposing itself in some ways. In *Summer* Lawyer Royall had once tried to enter his adopted daughter Gharity's room and she rejected him. But she was not given her name in vain, and in the end the only option left for her is to accept the «charity» that he offers. When she tries to escape to the Mountain, he finds her exhausted, partly from her pregnancy and partly from her long walk, her hunger, and the horror that the miserable life up there produces in her. Wharton leaves no doubts about Charity's physical condition: «tears of weariness and weakness were dimming her eyes»¹⁷, «a feeling of complete passiveness had once more come over her» (pp. 268-69), «her own body began to tremble with the dread of her own weakness» (p. 270). Royall did not bring about this state of things, and he offers her a possible

15 R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, New York, Harper & Row, 1975, p. 309.

16 Ammons, p. 21.

17 Edith Wharton, *Summer*, New York, Harper & Row-Perennial Library, 1979, p. 267.

way out. But we know that if she had had other alternatives or even more strength at the moment he found her, the marriage would not have taken place.

Even if brute force was not sanctioned in Old New York as a means of subduing a woman, it was in the interest of the patriarchy to maintain an obvious difference between the physical strength of man and that of woman. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Charlotte Gilman describes the situation in Wharton's world. Smallness and physical weakness are sexual traits to the point that the term «weaker sex» is used to refer to women. If the traits related to feminine weakness are valued by society, the woman who wants to feel accepted will have to cultivate whatever makes her seem feminine, that is weak, and eliminate what would make her seem strong. The effect of this tendency, according to Gilman, is a racial weakening; as an example, she points to the women of oriental countries, like the Chinese women with their bound feet. Similarly, the women in the Moslem harem are reduced to a life of total passivity and limited to a single sexual function, excluded from any activity which would develop and fortify their bodies and improve the race in future generations. Gilman compares these «weak» women, including those of her nineteenth-century America, with those of the early Germanic tribes or the savage women who gave birth to much stronger offspring¹⁸.

In the society Wharton describes we see that if the foot was not bound so tightly as that of the oriental woman, the narrow wasp waist was. A woman with a wasp waist was esteemed, and so the tiny waist had to be produced by whatever means, generally by the use of the corset. It might seem difficult to relate the corset to economic theory, but Veblen shows that there is a very obvious connection. For him, the corset does not make a woman more attractive; it merely makes her weaker. In his *Theory of the Leisure Class* he shows how the moneyed class, that of Edith Wharton, needs to make its wealth evident to all observers. One efficient way of doing this is to make it clear that the women do not work, since their husbands have enough means to have them idly consuming without producing. This can be shown by the use of certain types of clothing, especially the corset. Of this garment he says:

The corset is, in economic theory, substantially a mutilation, undergone for the lowering of the subject's vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work. It is true, the corset impairs the personal attractions of the wearer, but the loss suffered on that score is offset by the gain in reputability which comes of her visibly increased expensiveness and infirmity. It may broadly be set down that the womanliness of woman's apparel resolves itself, in point of

18 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Woman and Economics*, New York, Harper & Row, 1966. pp. 45-6.

substantial fact, into the more effective hindrance to useful exertion offered by the garments peculiar to women¹⁹.

And with the corset, Veblen lists the high-heeled shoe, women's hats, long and full skirts, all of which efficiently hinder a woman's movements.

Edith Wharton grew up with a strong consciousness of the importance of dress. In her autobiography she repeatedly refers to her interest in this aspect of the feminine world, and in her novels she describes the apparel of her feminine characters with a wealth of detail, not only for its intrinsic interest but also for what it may tell us of their wearers. We know that Judy Trenor advises Lily Bart not to wear her red crêpe-de-chine in order not to frighten off a possible husband and that Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence* scandalizes New York with her exotic dresses, instead of keeping to the norm that requires a woman to receive visits in «a close-fitting armor of whale-bone silk, slightly open in the neck, with lace ruffles filling in the crack, and tight sleeves with a flounce uncovering just enough wrist to show an Etruscan gold bracelet or a velvet band» (p. 83), giving the wearer about the same freedom of movement and the same decorum as a mummy. The motive for such attire was obviously protection, as the word «armor» indicates. Thinking about his wife after her death, Archer feels that her life «had been as closely girt as her figure» (p. 265). Just as her clothes had constricted her body, the conventions of society had constricted her spirit.

Even if public opinion had not been against physical activity, the style of feminine clothes would have been enough to discourage any effort. In *A Backward Glance* Edith Wharton describes the riding-habit that was worn in her mother's day: «from motives of modesty riding-habits were cut to trail the ground, so that it was almost impossible to mount unassisted»²⁰. Typical of the activities that women could carry out was the archery contest in Newport that the novelist portrays in *The Age of Innocence*; archery, although requiring some skill, did not require taxing physical exertion, and was basically an excuse for showing off lovely dresses.

The attire for these archery contests is significant. Wharton describes it in *A Backward Glance*: «and a pretty sight the meeting was, with parents and elders seated in a semicircle on the turf behind the lovely archeresses in floating silks or muslins, with their wide leghorn hats, and heavy veils flung back only at the moment of aiming» (p. 46). The American woman that Wharton portrays with a veil is reminiscent of her Arab counterpart. According to the official explanation, in America veils were worn to protect the complexion, but undoubtedly there was another element of protection at stake. Like the houses of the day whose windows were covered with two or

¹⁹ Veblen, p. 172.

²⁰ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, New York, Appleton, 1934, p. 17.

three curtains, a woman was often «protected» from too much outside influence, suffocating, as Cynthia Wolff says, her identity «in veiling layers of protective gauze»²¹.

The literature that women read contributed to maintaining the myth of feminine weakness. Romanticism had disseminated the image of woman as an ethereal being, almost without substance. In *The Custom of the Country* the sentimental novels that Undine had read filled her head with «pathetic allusions to woman's frailty» (p. 376). However, she felt the influence of that literature only momentarily because she had no intention of conforming to the myth of the weaker sex, incapable of acting. Others were not so lucky.

As the women generally did not progress mentally beyond childhood, it is logical that children's literature —especially fairy tales— held a strong influence over their imagination and expectations and contributed to their acceptance of a weak, subordinate role. Armonía Rodríguez discusses the sexism that is found in children's literature, which is

un reflejo más de ese contexto cultural e ideológico que tan bien definidos y repartidos tiene los roles de hombre y mujer... Cumpliendo además una función pedagógica, siempre acorde con un concepto de la educación sexista que discrimina a la mujer, la literatura infantil contribuye a preparar psicológicamente a niños y niñas, desde su más tierna edad, para que asuman, de buen grado, el papel que esta sociedad les ha asignado: activo y emprendedor el del niño; pasivo y de segundo orden, el de la niña²².

In fairy stories there is usually a beautiful and of course weak woman who escapes from some danger, thanks to a strong savior with whom she falls in love and lives happily ever after. Elizabeth Ammons sees an interesting relationship between several of Wharton's novels and certain fairy tales which shows that the woman cannot begin to free herself until she lays aside the image of false romantic love that fairy tales generate²³. She sees *The House of Mirth* as an inverted version of Cinderella (the heroine ends up poor and abandoned) and *The Fruit of the Tree* is an inverted version of Sleeping Beauty (Justine is awake but she is obliged to adopt a state of mental inactivity). Where the connection is most obvious is in *Ethan Frome* and *The Reef*. In the first, Ammons shows how the characters correspond to the archetypes of the genre —witch, beautiful damsel, honest woodcutter— and the events hand the images remind us of Snow White, only Wharton is not optimistic.

21 Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 41.

22 Armonía Rodríguez, «Ideología sexista y literatura», *Cuadernos de pedagogía*, n.º 36, diciembre 1977, pp. 36-7.

23 These ideas are developed in Ammons, pp. 57-96.

The witch wins and the lovers do not live happily ever after. Mattie and Ethan's dreams of escaping together to a new life merely bring them to disaster, converting young Mattie in another witch, just like Zeena.

The Reef contains allusions to both Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, and narrates the story of Anna Leath and, to a lesser degree, of Sophy Viner; both of them unfortunately «harbor romantic dreams of female salvation through love and marriage»²⁴. Anna is the princess who dreams of the magic kiss from the handsome prince who rescues her from a life that is comfortable but lacking in deep emotions. It cannot come true, because a woman must not depend on childish fantasies to establish her happiness. When the long-awaited prince arrives in real life, he is not what she had dreamed about: for Anna «the Darrow she worshipped was inseparable from the Darrow she abhorred»²⁵. He turns out to be the typical feudal lord who wants only to exercise his dominion over a valuable possession; a refined woman. To him it seems completely logical that she should render him homage because he sees himself as a sort of god-creator. Thinking about the Anna he knew earlier, he felt that «if she had been given to him then, he would have put warmth in her veins and light in her eyes, would have made her a woman through and through» (p. 71).

Besides the aspect of domination by some form —real or apparent— of physical strength, there are more subtle reasons that make the woman accept a subordinate role. The most obvious is that after so many centuries of forced domination, it does not even occur to her to think that there may exist the possibility of not being dominated, as the untouchables in India do not conceive of aspiring to be more than the scorned of the earth. Wharton reflects this same centuries-old inability to question the established ideas in *The Old Maid*: «Social tolerance was not dealt in the same measure to men and to women, and neither Delia nor Charlotte had ever wondered why: like all the young women of their class, they simply bowed to the inelectable»²⁶.

If the influence of the age-old customs failed, men could turn to brainwashing to oblige women to accept their control, as in the case of Mr. Raycie in *False Dawn*. «Mr. Raycie had long since convinced his wife that this method of dealing with her, if not lavish, was suitable, and in fact 'handsome'; when she spoke of the subject to her relations, it was with tears of gratitude» (p. 385). If he manages to get ahold of her money so completely that she is without a penny to call her own except for what he deigns to give her and she accepts so willingly, one must recognize that this «convinced» is merely a euphemism for «brainwashed».

24 Ammons, p. 79.

25 Edith Wharton, *The Reef*, New York, Appleton, 1912, p. 301.

26 Edith Wharton, *The Old Maid* in *Edith Wharton Omnibus*, New York: Scribners, 1978, p. 448.

In Wharton's world, if a woman did not accept or was not lucky enough to find a husband to dominate her, the alternative in the best of cases would be to remain under the authority of some male relative; rarely would she be free to develop herself as she might wish. (Only in a few examples —Ellen Olenska, Kate Clephane, Wharton herself after her divorce— do we find a woman who in any sense controls her destiny.) The subordination in this case is no doubt easier to bear, as the man need not show off his control over his sister or his niece, as he does when he deals with his wife. Nevertheless, the condition of the unmarried woman produced a certain uncomfortable scorn; the very term «old maid» brings to mind negative connotations. The main character in one of Wharton's best short novels, titled precisely *The Old Maid*, is Charlotte Lovell, who becomes the typical old maid, object of the pity of the married women. Thus the solution of escaping from the more accentuated forms of male domination by not marrying was so socially unattractive that it predisposed women to accept anything in order to be able to consider themselves within the bounds of holy matrimony.

Important as these reasons are, there is an even stronger one for accepting male domination because, as Jean Baker Miller has put it, a subordinate «has to concentrate on basic survival»²⁷. In *The House of Mirth* Lily tries to catch Percy Gryce, a dull but rich young man. «It was a hateful fate —but how escape from it? What choice had she?» (p. 29). One could argue that a woman of the moneyed class would have other options, but the rest of this novel is dedicated to proving that even a woman of upper class background often cannot choose any road but that of subjugation. Something in Lilly rebels at each step, but life teaches her that a woman must not aspire to more. At the end of the novel —and of her life— she retreats into the sleeping medicine and what it produces: «the sense of complete subjugation» (p. 335). When all her possibilities have vanished, even the least desirable, she is left with the sad reality that a woman must subjugate herself in order to live. Not having done this in time, she can only console herself by taking a few drops more, too many this time, of chloral.

Mattie Silver also sought death, in a more direct and conscious way than Lily, perhaps because her situation was even more critical. When Zeena threw her out, she had only two possibilities —that of a sales girl, something that was too tiring in those days for a person with somewhat delicate health, or that of a prostitute. Mattie was not trying to avoid male domination, but she shows us clearly the lack of alternatives for the woman who did not marry, and marrying generally meant subordination. Between not being able to survive and subordination to a man not many women would choose the first.

²⁷ Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1978, p. 10.

Even in the less critical cases where the physical survival of the woman was not threatened, we find that she risked at least psychological impairment. What is left physically of Mattie Silver after the fateful ride down the hill is similar to the spiritual mutilation which Justine Brent had to undergo in *The Fruit of the Tree* in order to maintain her matrimonial bond with Amherst. She was forced to witness the death of her dream of sharing ideals, work and that «free comradeship of mind» that she mistakenly thought possible with him. After he discovers her «offense» —acting like an independent person— nothing can be the same; and he makes her accept an openly subordinate and submissive position against her own will and nature. And that position is all the more hateful because Amherst has resuscitated the ghost of his former wife and has idealized her to the point that she occupies the place that Justine had dreamed of for herself. The live woman, who is intelligent, sensitive, noble, capable, is obliged to accept the domination that the now dead Bessy, infinitely inferior to her, had acclaimed as the road to happiness for women.

Women as a group of dominated beings, are not alone, and they share several traits with other dominated groups. For many decades in America, the blacks, the poor and women could not vote. The right to vote is symbolic because the vote means power and the aforementioned groups were denied access to power. He who lacks power is easily dominated by him who has it.

The similarity between the traditional situation of women and that of unfree blacks is emphasized by Janeway:

The Negro Uncle Tom acts in orthodox «female» fashion: he is pliable, undemanding, trained to please and satisfied (on the surface, which is the only place it matters to his master) to live his master's life vicariously. He appears... to accept a place in the world that denies him a chance of independent action and judgment. Since he cannot act autonomously, any plans he lays must find their consummation by means of tricks and indirection. If these tricks are discovered, he will be accused of such feminine faults as slyness and untrustworthiness²⁸.

This quotation seems to reflect the thoughts of Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*: «A woman's standard of truthfulness was tacitly held to be lower: she was the subject creature and versed in the arts of the enslaved» (p. 234).

Reading *The House of Mirth*, one sadly observes this black/subordinate/woman behavior in Lily Bart. Wharton describes her quite often in terms of her capacity to adapt and to please others. Lily's aunt speaks of her niece's «pliancy», something that is born out of her difficult life: «misfortune had made Lily supple instead of hardening her, and a pliable substance is less easy to break than a stiff one» (p. 40). Since Lily, like the black slave, totally

28 Janeway, p. 108.

depends on others, she has had to relegate her personal wishes to her inner self, leaving her surface like the clay that is given its shape according to the use to which it is to be put. When she plans to trap Percy Gryce, she metamorphoses into the type of woman that would be acceptable to a man who had promised his mother never to go outside on a rainy day without his galoshes. She was conscious of «her own power to look and to be so exactly what the occasion required» (p. 94). This capacity reassures her at times, but in the worst moments she realizes that it means a sort of slavery, an endless list of «others» that she must please to be able to continue living as she wants: «Whichever way she looked she saw only a future of servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality» (p. 107). The chains that assured the black's obedience were of a worthless metal; those of Lily's bracelet were of gold, but they made her feel equally enslaved: «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» (p. 9).

Like the minority of women in Wharton's fiction who do not unquestioningly accept what society has prepared for them, Lily Bart tried to rebel at various times during her stay in that «house of mirth», but her life did end in defeat, at least apparently and by her society's standards, because her rebellion was much more authentic than, for example, Undine's and her moral sense was much more strongly developed. Lily knew that her world would never satisfy her, in part, one must admit, because she could not be an integral part of it as she lacked the necessary economic means. But whenever she took a good look at that world, usually influenced by Lawrence Seldon, it disgusted her. Lily's problem is that her rebellion is a dead-end street because she has no other world to turn to. She reproaches Seldon: «'Why do you do this to me?... Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me if you have nothing to give me instead?'» (p. 76). Seldon's character contains the seeds of understanding and companionship that would have made possible a happy relationship between a man and a woman, but he is cowardly and does not dare offer her the possibility of leaving behind her the world that limited the development of her spirit until it is too late. Undine would never have let herself be defeated in the «house of mirth» but Lily lacks the necessary aggressiveness, and her weak attempts at rebellion only bring her more difficulties. In this respect we could consider Seldon partially responsible for her death; as she herself told him, he gave her a higher consciousness but did not offer her options. He opened her eyes but did not open any doors, and she lacked decision, strength and the means to fight alone for something that she only vaguely sensed. The novel's pessimism and that of the majority of Wharton's works, comes from the lack of hope in the possibilities for the woman does not come under the subjugation of the conventions of patriarchal society.