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RALPH AND LILY: VICTIMS IN A BOUNDARY WORLD

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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT

Wharton’s victimization of Lily in *House of Mirth* and Ralph Marvell in *Custom of the Country* raises certain issues worthy of a comparative discussion. This thesis focuses on the characterizations of Lily and Ralph as “boundary beings,” exploring Wharton’s use of gender differences and the internal and external forces which lead to Lily and Ralph’s deaths. As boundary beings, Lily and Ralph exist on the border of materialistic reality and romantic illusion. The struggle between their own private, inner worlds and the public personas each must portray to survive not only is a component of their destruction, but a reflection of Wharton’s own duality as a writer and a woman of high society. I also examine how Wharton’s portrayal of Lily draws on her own experience as a woman in a passionless and difficult marriage, versus her characterization of Ralph which was written after her divorce and a passionate affair with Morton Fullerton.

Wharton poignantly illustrates the complexity and vulnerability of two characters who border conventional society and aesthetic idealism. Lily and Ralph, caught continually between their own self-delusions and reality, between child-like naïveté and adult responsibilities, and between their inner and public selves, suffer dire consequences in this boundary being existence. Their victimization is not only a statement of what a ‘frivolous society’ can destroy, but a confirmation of the power of upbringing, personalities, money, love, and passion in directing an individual’s choices and ultimate fate. Lily and Ralph are trapped between meeting the requirements of a mercenary society and preserving their private selves. When their illusions are shattered and the reality is unbearable, they cannot survive.
RALPH AND LILY: VICTIMS IN A BOUNDARY WORLD
In 1905 Edith Wharton completed *The House of Mirth*, a grim satire on New York’s high society at the turn-of-the-century. Speaking of *The House of Mirth* in her autobiography twenty-nine years later, Wharton claimed that “a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart” (*A Backward Glance*, 207). In 1913, Wharton’s “frivolous society” strikes a deathblow again in *The Custom of the Country*—not to a beautiful woman, but to a refined but ineffectual man. Both novels depict these victims in the context of the social mores and ambiguities of the nouveau riche and old New York society. However, Wharton not only shifts from a female to a male victim, but also from the group to the individual (Lily’s societal downfall versus Ralph’s disastrous marriage to Undine). Yet, in both cases, she is dealing with basic human needs within the context of her society. Old New York society dwells in a conservative world, disdainfully detached from social issues and entrenched in an air of propriety. Conforming to the powerful social structure is a necessity for both Lily and Ralph. “Characters who ‘fit’ have a space to live; those who fail to ‘fit’—because of psychological temperament or social background or economic conditions—have no space to survive, are indeed doomed” (Joslyn 39). Lily and Ralph cannot ‘fit’ or ultimately survive in New York’s highest level of society because of their personalities, upbringing, and financial pressures.

Among much that has been written regarding the topic of victimization in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, there has been a
predominant focus on Wharton's message of social criticism and the limits society places upon women. Paralleling the structural aspects of the two novels — the roles of protagonists and heroes — comparisons are commonly made between Lily and Undine and Selden and Ralph. However, Lily and Ralph, as tragic victims and, as many believe, displaced projections of Wharton herself, are also worthy of a comparative analysis. In speaking of Lily, Linda Wagner-Martin states that she "is placed in the same role of isolated and frustrated consciousness that Wharton experienced as a woman attempting to become a writer although her family, friends, husband and society did not approve that aim—or recognize why that aim was important" (53-54). Wharton also places Ralph in a position of struggle and alienation, with an even more obvious allusion to herself in his role as an aspiring writer (both the character Ralph and Wharton herself wrote essays on Walt Whitman to understand their own roles as writers).

This thesis focuses on the characterizations of Lily and Ralph as "boundary beings," exploring Wharton's use of gender differences and the internal and external forces which lead to Lily and Ralph's deaths. As boundary beings, Lily and Ralph exist on the border of materialistic reality and romantic illusion. The struggle between their own private, inner worlds and the public personae each must portray to survive not only is a component of their destruction, but a reflection of Wharton's own duality as a writer and a woman of high society. I also examine how Wharton's portrayal of Lily draws on her own experience as a woman in a passionless and difficult marriage, versus her characterization of
Ralph which was written after her divorce and a passionate affair with Morton Fullerton.

As Irving Howe observes, Ralph Marvell and Lily Bart are both "too squeamish to play the game as roughly as it must be played" (35). As boundary beings, Lily and Ralph live between reality and self-delusion, are caught in a conflict between personal desire and social necessity, and are torn between the inner person and public self. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton speaks of "magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination" (215). Lily is governed by society's laws and her own impulses, which, as Wai-chee Dimock notes, leads to her "paradoxical conformity and deviance" (787). She feels a compulsion to both kindle and restrain her natural instincts, most specifically with Selden, a long-time admirer and friend. The conflict between her romantic nature and the reality of survival surfaces in the scene with Selden at Bellomont:

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 prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive's grasp grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them; the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, and the free spirit quivered for flight. (102)

Lily suppresses her fears and often tries to ignore reality, especially the consequences of her own actions. Wharton makes very clear that Lily deals with her moral qualms by avoiding the implications and outcomes of her conduct:

"Her personal fastidiousness had a moral equivalent and when she made a tour
of inspection of her own mind, there were certain closed doors she did not open” (131). This avoidance is especially apparent in her relationship with Gus Trenor, the husband of an important social friend. Gus helps Lily financially, and she continually suppresses her recognition of Trenor’s desire of repayment through sexual favors. It is a door she mentally shuts tight with every encounter, until Trenor literally places himself in front of the door and she cannot escape the reality of her position and the degradation of her actions. She slips from the border of her fantasy world, falling into a self-loathing quagmire.

Like Lily, Ralph also chooses to close doors and avoid reality. Falling in love with Undine, Ralph sees himself as her savior “with the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her” (86). He perceives her shallowness as mere inexperience and is determined to open “new windows in her mind” (140). In the final weeks of meandering through the hilltops of Italy during their honeymoon, his wife’s dissatisfaction with his company “hung on the edge of consciousness, but he had turned from it with the heart’s instinctive clinging to the unrealities by which it lives” (139). He looked upon their four months in Italy as a time of idyllic, life-affirming sensations, but all the while Undine was bored with the countryside and being alone with him. Over the next three years, Ralph continues to live in unreality:

Since then he had been walking with a ghost: the miserable ghost of his illusion. Only he had somehow vivified, coloured, substantiated it, by the force of his own great need—as a man might breathe a
semblance of life into a dear drowned body that he cannot give up for dead. (200)

Ultimately, Ralph’s illusion is shattered by Undine’s desertion. He closes the door to his marriage and the divorce proceedings as he locks away the legal divorce notice and submits to “his family’s determination to ignore the whole episode” (378). And in a final, desperate action to shut out his agony and no longer face anyone, he closes the door to his room and shoots himself.

Wharton builds upon the victimization of Lily and Ralph and their roles as boundary beings through repeating images of childlike qualities. Wharton’s allusions to childishness in Lily and Ralph emphasize their helplessness and naïveté. Inhabiting a border between childishness and adulthood, they are vulnerable, impressionable, and open to victimization. Both in some aspects of her appearance, and in her emotional life, Lily remains very much a child: she appears to have a “girlish smoothness” (4); she brings her financial troubles to Trenor “with the trustfulness of a child” (135); speaking with Selden, she looks up at him “with the troubled gravity of a child” (13); missing Selden on the night of her near-rape, she expresses the “open misery of a child” (267) and Gerty comforts her by “pillowing her head...as a mother makes a nest for a tossing child” (270); when she visits Selden for the last time, he speaks to her “as though she were a troubled child” (495)); and as she struggles for sleep on the final night of her life, “her poor little anguished self shrank and cowered” (520).

Whereas one finds childlike references to Lily throughout The House of
Mirth, in *The Custom of the Country* the strongest allusion to childlike traits in Ralph appears in the novel’s early sections. Undine first describes Ralph as a “little fellow” (23) and as Popple’s “little friend” (35) and Claire calls him “Ralphie, dear” (49). Ralph’s own reverie paints a picture of childhood naivety and innocence: “he could do charming things, if only he had known how to finish them!” (79); “there was a world of wonders within him...so coloured by outer impressions, it wove a secret curtain about him, and he came and went in it with the same joy of furtive possession”; (80) and his secret boyhood sea-side cave, his inner world, lives in his imagination as “a thronged and echoing place when Undine Spragg appeared on its threshold” (81). Wharton continues to use childlike images of Ralph: he is “too little versed in affairs” (84); he sees Italy filled with “secret treasures”(134); lying on the ground and gazing at the sky, he dreams of “Words...flashing like brilliant birds...he had but to wave his magic wand to have them flutter down to him” (134); and holding Undine’s hand, he lifts her fingers “one by one, like a child playing with piano-keys” (135). However, in Book Four there is only one boyish description of Ralph, followed by an intimation of maturity: “As he spoke his heart beat like a boy’s; but once the words were out they gave him a feeling of self-confidence, and he began to sketch his plan” (371). Wharton’s choice of words in her childlike references to Ralph accentuate a dreaminess: ‘charming things’, ‘world of wonders’, ‘secret curtain’, ‘secret treasures’, ‘too little versed in affairs’, ‘gazing’, ‘magic wand’. By moving away from these childlike references as the story progresses, Wharton
brings this boundary being closer to reality. In contrast, Lily, even in her final moments, hovers at “the dizzy brink of the unreal” (520). Wharton’s recurring childlike references to Lily emphasize an emotional neediness—‘trustfulness,’ ‘beseeching earnestness,’ ‘open misery,’ ‘tossing child,’ ‘troubled child,’ ‘poor little anguished self.’ Ralph’s boyishness fades, but Lily never loses her childlike qualities. However, their lack of maturity makes them easily victimized by the predators of their society.

The avoidance of conflict and unpleasantries, the struggle of these two boundary beings to cling to romantic ideals, ultimately helps lead them to their tragic deaths. As Katherine Joslin notes, “Wharton thought of survival in terms of fitness” and “the main conflict is between personal desire and social necessity” (38). This conflict is woven into an intricate pattern in the characterizations of Lily and Ralph. Their personal desires are strongly influenced by their social upbringings and their idealistic spirits. Both Lily and Ralph desire to live aesthetically inspired lives. Lily yearns for a life of luxury and comfort, but has romantic dreams of marrying not merely a rich man, but a nobleman with vast estates or a prince with a castle and connections in the Vatican. However, living in the realm of New York society, she is trying to secure a husband in the upper social circle so that she may live “the life she longed to lead, the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness” (144). Ralph, in a secure social position, does not have Lily’s craving for luxury and fine
things; he dreams of an intellectual aesthete’s life beyond the social fluttering of high society. Wharton describes Ralph with “frugal wants—enough to buy books (not ‘editions’), and pay now and then for a holiday dash to the great centres of art and ideas” (80). His aesthetic sense is further demonstrated during four months of honeymooning in Italy; he is enthralled and intoxicated by the Sienese air, “heady fragrances,” “unimagined colour,” and night skies “bubbling with stars” (134). He dreams of writing, catching adjectives that tumble from Nature’s beauty. However, disillusionment and divorce alter Ralph’s perspective and he stops looking at life with gallant idealism. While he still dreams of being a successful writer, his focus turns to writing a book “in which men should look no bigger than the insects they were” (370). As a boundary being, he is tilting more toward reality and his son is becoming the center of his world.

Lily also changes her perspective as she becomes more and more impoverished, although she continues to struggle between reality and dreams. She always longs for luxury, but on the final evening before her death “It was no longer, however, from the vision of material poverty that she turned with the greatest shrinking” (515). Her greatest yearning in these final moments is for a sense of belonging, roots, a home “put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss” (517).

Ralph has deep roots in two socially established New York families, the Dagonets and Marvells, whose wealth does not match their social position. Although money is limited on both sides of the family, the Dagonets are part of
“old world” New York: “Ralph sometimes called his mother and grandfather the Aborigines, and likened them to those vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race” (77-78). Being male and a member of a family with a secure social position, Ralph is not restricted by the same social constraints as Lily. Lily is an orphan clinging precariously to high society and subject to a double standard in society’s code of behavior for women. As Ned Van Alstyne puts it, while discussing Lily’s tableau vivant: “When a girl’s as good-looking as that she’d better marry; then no questions are asked. In our imperfectly organized society there is no provision as yet for the young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations” (254).

Lily grew up in a world that nurtured a personality bordering between illusion and reality. Her family life vacillated between “grey interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense” (45), always maintaining an appearance of living in wealth and style. Although her father was related to old New York society—the Penistons and the Stepneys, he had no family money to sustain him. He worked long hours in a downtown office to support his wife and Lily. Coming from a more ordinary family, but with intense social ambition, Lily’s mother had a strong talent for producing impressive effects on small means and “living as though one were much richer than the bank-book denoted” (46). Wharton describes the social position of Lily’s parents as a facade, a pretense in “a house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was ‘company’” (44).
When Lily is orphaned, she is taken in by her wealthy aunt, Mrs. Peniston. This arrangement provides Lily with some financial support and a setting of social respectability from which to pursue marriage to a proper suitor. When Mrs. Peniston dies, Lily is disinherited, losing her only opportunity for a home and comfortable social position outside of marriage.

Even without an income and a proper home, Lily continues to live on a border between illusion and reality. She struggles to maintain her position in the world of a wealthy society. Blake Nevius describes her plight as the “victimizing effect of a particular environment on one of its more helplessly characteristic products” (56). Lily is, indeed, a product and victim of the society and environment she so desperately seeks. In Lily’s winding descent, she slowly moves away from a sphere of wealth, art, and beauty into an impoverished and shabby existence. After her rejection by the Trenors, she travels a “downward gyre...from the Dorsets’ companion, to the Gormers’ social secretary, to Mrs. Hatch’s private secretary, to common labor in a millinery shop, to death in a cheap boarding house” (Ammons 37). On the other hand, Ralph is solidly entrenched in New York’s ruling family network and does not suffer the fate of losing his position in society. His downward spiral, however, is an emotional journey through disillusionment with his wife, humiliation in his employment, embarrassment over his divorce, shame for losing custody of his son, and mortification in learning of his wife’s previous marriage to Elmer Moffatt.

Both victims suffer the consequences of upbringings based on pretense
and propriety, and in Ralph’s case, passivity. Following the family tradition, Ralph attended Harvard, “then Oxford, then a year of wandering and rich initiation” (79). In the first part of the novel, he spends most of his time reading, writing prose and poetry, and sketching—yet never finishing anything creative. This aimless lifestyle meets with no objections from his family: “For four or five generations it had been the rule of both houses that a young fellow should go to Columbia or Harvard, read law, and then lapse into more or less cultivated inaction” (79). The chief requirement of Ralph’s upbringing is that he conduct himself as a gentleman, maintaining a mode of behavior reflecting a disdain for earning money, a contained appreciation for fine things, and an antiquated uprightness that did not distinguish between personal and business honor.

Ralph is not raised to do anything, nor does his grandfather see him as capable of doing anything. The grandfather tells Mr. Spragg that Ralph would even “manage to make cooking-stoves unremunerative as a profession” (117). In *Feast of Words*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes that “The very attitudes of his body reveal Ralph’s fundamental passivity…Sitting, leaning, waiting, reclining—these are Ralph’s habitual postures” (238). Ralph’s “deadly lassitude,” as Wolff points out, causes him to ignore Undine’s terms of separation and suffer a mortal blow—the loss of custody of his son (239). He clearly admits to himself that “he, Ralph Marvell, a sane man, young, able-bodied, in full possession of his wits, had assisted at the perpetration of this abominable wrong, had passively forfeited his right to the flesh of his body, the blood of his being!” (377).
Ralph’s inaction not only stems from inbred passivity. The Dagonet household adheres to a strict moral code, and perhaps the most damaging aspect of their family dynamic is avoidance and repression, “the tendency to withdraw from the rest of society and to ignore everything that is difficult or ‘common’ or ‘not nice’: the adoption of a determinedly unrealistic attitude” (Wolff 239). Everything must maintain the status quo—always a calm sea and a proper appearance. They bury under a veneer of propriety all fear, conflict, anger, and pain. Divorce is abhorrent and disgraceful: “In their vocabulary the word ‘divorce’ was wrapped in such a dark veil of innuendo as no lady-like hand would care to lift” (295). Undine’s desertion of Ralph and her son is never mentioned in conversation by his mother or sister. Ralph is victimized by a world in which his damaged soul is silenced. He cannot speak to anyone of the pain caused by Undine. “His family had thrown over the whole subject a pall of silence…As for his mother, the idea of talking over the situation was positively frightening to her” (294). In contrast, he is victimized by the outside world as his plight is made public through newspaper articles and headlines. The topic of his supposed preoccupation with business overriding his wife’s needs even reaches into editorials, pulpits, and a Family Weekly in his dentist’s waiting room. As the publicity dies down and the heat of his embarrassment cools, Ralph slowly feels “the tonic effect of silence” (296), but loses his ability to put his anguished thoughts into words. The internalization of his pain has a numbing affect that allows him to gradually adapt “to the new order of things” (367), but it does not
allow him to heal completely and he knows that “his footing” is still insecure. His pain is in remission, but his role as victim is not over, and his final destruction is imminent.

Lily is also brought up with a concern for propriety and appearance; her mother spent her life in pretense in order to maintain her tenuous acceptance by the social elite. However, Lily’s need for elegant surroundings, beautiful dresses, fine jewelry, and luxurious social events overrides the traditions of proper behavior ingrained in Ralph. She, like Ralph, had not been raised for any practical purpose; Ralph was expected to lead a passive, gentleman’s existence and Lily “had been fashioned to adorn and delight” (486-487). Yet unlike Ralph, whose moral code is as imbedded in him as is his ability to breathe, “there had been nothing in her training to develop any continuity of moral strength” (422). She refuses to provide sexual favors to Trenor in return for financial help, but she will serve as a diversion to Bertha Dorset’s husband while his wife carries on an affair; she lies often to manipulate her position socially, yet she chooses not to blackmail Bertha Dorset. Her sense of superiority is based on her own romantic illusions, not on the realities of her situation. And also unlike Ralph, Lily “most effectively demonstrates her personal power, her ability to act rather than simply respond” by her skillful manipulations of Percy Gryce, Simon Rosedale, Lawrence Selden, and Gus Trenor (Lindberg 62).

While their upbringings and expectations nurture their romantic illusions, each character’s struggle for survival is based ultimately on the need for money.
Wharton demonstrates the power of money in a "social system...so flawed that even the most innocent woman cannot escape being victimized—unless she comes endowed with financial power of her own" (Wagner-Martin 50). Lily is caught between the pretense of belonging to the wealthy set and the reality of a limited income. Dependent on her aunt’s support, Lily has expensive tastes and no financial sense; she constantly lives beyond her means. The only way out of her predicament is to marry a rich man, but every time she has the opportunity, she somehow thwarts it. Through gambling and excessive spending, Lily places herself in a desperate situation. She makes a fatal error in seeking help from Gus Trenor; her association with Trenor so appalls her Aunt that she disinherits her. Having no financial resources, she slips fatally down the social ladder.

Ralph also depends on a limited family allowance. Before Ralph marries Undine, he is perfectly content with this income, which covers his frugal needs. However, Undine’s extravagant spending results in an inexhaustible need for money. In spite of additional support from her father, Undine’s spending drives Ralph into a real estate job for which he is unsuited. His inability to support her in a high lifestyle leads to their divorce. Undine wields the final financial blow; desperately needing money for an annulment, she holds the custody of her son as ransom. Ironically, Ralph sees Moffat, Undine’s first husband and a successful speculator, as his only hope to raise the money.

Financial pressures wreak havoc and lead to desperate measures in the lives of Lily and Ralph. Both Lily and Ralph choose to invest money to raise the
suns they need—and both of them are naïve in their trust and comprehension of the risks involved. Their differing genders contribute to a difference in risks. As a woman turning to a man for financial help, and using her charms to persuade him, Lily places herself in a compromising position. Unknowingly, she risks her reputation and her virginity. Ralph risks his pride, the loss of Clare’s money as well as his own, and most importantly, the loss of his son. Unlike Lily, his reputation is not tarnished by an unlucky investment. Lily loses on a very practical and fatal level; she is disinherited and cannot support herself. She ends up in a boardinghouse and, physically broken down, accidentally kills herself in an effort to sleep. Ralph loses deeply on an emotional level; he cannot regain custody of his son.

However, it is more than a lack of money that leads to their destruction. Pride, humiliation, and shame defeat Lily and Ralph. Early in the novel, Lily possesses an air of superiority; pondering a future with Percy Gryce, she muses:

Her beauty itself was not the mere ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience: her skill in enhancing it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to give it a kind of permanence.

She felt she could trust it to carry her through to the end. (78)

Ironically, rather than ‘carrying her through,’ her beauty helps cause her end. Her striking physical attributes attract male admiration and result in destructive jealousy. Bertha Dorset, jealous of Selden’s attention to Lily, destroys Lily’s chance to marry Percy Gryce. She also uses Lily’s charms to keep her husband
occupied while she carries on with Ned Silvertone. In order to calm her husband’s rage over her affair and end his attraction to Lily, Bertha publicly rejects Lily with an implication that she has behaved in an unseemly fashion with her husband. Joslin states that “beauty and sexuality provided her in the end with no real power at all” (60). However, Lily’s misuse of her power and her ignorance of how her beauty affects people contribute to her destruction. She is unaware of the lethal nature of Bertha Dorset’s jealousy, and therefore places herself in a highly vulnerable position. Lily, a naïve victim, is completely, publicly humiliated by Bertha and falls deeper into social oblivion.

Other moments of shame and embarrassment contribute to Lily’s downfall. Her very first blunder is her encounter with Rosedale outside of Selden’s building. She has endangered her reputation by visiting alone with Selden; she is well aware of the impropriety of her actions. In her embarrassment, she loses her normal poise, awkwardly lies to Rosedale and rudely rebuffs him. Consequently, Rosedale relays her seemingly improper behavior with Selden to Gus Trenor. One of the most painfully humiliating scenes for Lily is her confrontation with Trenor at his home. He crassly tells her he expected sexual favors for his financial assistance: “the man who pays for the dinner is generally allowed to have a seat at the table” (233). He confronts her further, alluding to her meeting with Selden and implying that she frequently and openly visits men in the privacy of their homes. He wants her, and is willing to pay for it. Lily is appalled: “Over and over her the sea of humiliation broke—
wave crashing on wave so close that the moral shame was one with the physical dread” (236). Lily, desperate to repay Trenor and exonerate herself, seeks financial assistance from her aunt and is even further humiliated by her aunt’s refusal and disgust.

Even after the humiliation and further tarnishing of her reputation by Bertha Dorset, and her aunt’s death and disinheritance, Lily is still too proud to live with Selden’s cousin, Gerty Farish. She rents a room in a dingy boarding house and tries to make a living for herself. She fails miserably, even at trimming hats in fashionable millinery. Her situation desperate, she decides to blackmail Mrs. Dorset with Selden’s letters, but loses her resolve as she inadvertently turns down Selden’s street. As she realizes where she is, “the fact that, to attain her end, she must trade on his name, and profit by a secret of his past, chilled her blood with shame” (491). Instead she visits Selden, secretly slips Bertha Dorset’s letters into his fire, and her last chance for financial redemption burns away. In a final act to save her pride, Lily uses her aunt’s legacy to write a check to Trenor and lift herself from the shame and burden of the improper debt. Fearful of breaking her resolve in the morning, she writes the check and puts all her accounts in order before going to bed. Afraid of her own thoughts and needing to escape into the peace of sleep, she increases her dosage of chloral. “Darkness, darkness was what she must have at any cost” (521) to hide her fear of her future and the desperate shame of her position. She knows the risk of too much chloral, but drinks down the drug, ending her
struggle between the boundaries of reality and illusion forever.

In contrast to Lily, Ralph's possession of a social position in one of New York's ruling families speeds his destruction. His family's position makes him an appealing target for Undine's marital aspirations — and the consequences of marrying Undine ultimately drive him to suicide. Ralph, like Lily, is also destroyed by pride and humiliation. His marriage is a sham, Undine stays in Paris, and he is embarrassed by her lack of correspondence. Her constant demand for money makes him aware even further of his own ineptitude. He suffers unbearably when his divorce is made public, seeing his name on the first page of a newspaper held by a grimy man sitting next to him on the subway. The very grubbiness of this man reflects the dirtiness of divorce. “The coarse fingering of public curiosity had touched the secret places of his soul” (300), and Ralph is overwhelmingly humiliated. Lev Raphael, in Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame, claims that “This fierce taboo [divorce] will have devastating effects on his life and ultimately make him commit suicide” (281). However, it is not the divorce that ultimately drives him to suicide. As deeply as the actual divorce wounds Ralph, two years later he has made a slow recovery, is devoted to his son, and has started writing once again. Two fatal blows are yet to come, however, and these shocks move him to take his life. Ralph fails to acquire the money necessary to keep his son and he discovers that Undine was married previously to Elmer Moffatt. The thought of Moffat sexually possessing his wife,
touching her, drives Ralph over the edge. As Moffat tells Ralph of his marriage to Undine, “his bodily presence...began to loom, huge and portentous as some monster released from a magician’s body” (403-404). Ralph is aware of every detail of Moffat’s physical presence, becomes nauseous, and cannot get beyond the thought of ‘this man’ and his wife. He looks down at a crystal toy with repulsion at the thought of Moffat’s hand touching a beautiful object—but the beautiful object that he is actual envisioning is Undine. He imagines Undine in Moffat’s arms and wonders if she ever thinks of it. When he returns to his room, “He can still feel “that overwhelming sense of her physical nearness...Her freshness, her fragrance” (408) and the utter mortification of Moffat being ‘one’ with his wife is devastating. In his state of shock and humiliation, he panics briefly about where he will get money, but then cannot remember why he needed it. Ralph is in a crazed state, obsessed by thoughts of Undine, and insanely dreading even the sound of the housekeeper’s steps coming nearer. He cannot tolerate facing anyone. Ironically, Lily, who does act on her impulses, dies (probably) unintentionally by her own hand, and Ralph, who constantly surrenders his impulses to silence and passivity, impetuously pulls out a gun and shoots himself.

Lily’s fatal role as victim often has been considered to be a commentary on the plight of helpless women in a society ruled by men and money. However, by shifting genders and making Ralph the dying victim in The Custom of the Country, Wharton acknowledges that fatal victimization is not only a female
dilemma, but a human condition beyond gender distinction. Obviously Wharton does not see boundary beings—people being caught between their own romantic illusions and materialistic reality—limited to one gender. Both Lily and Ralph struggle between their public selves and their inner selves. Their victimization is more about human nature and the inhumanity of society. As Geoffrey Walton puts it:

The satire in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* has sources deeper than social disapproval or even indignation; there is, though the social code may be involved all the time, an underlying sense of human dignity, a pity for weakness, and of anger at malice and cruelty. (38)

Lily is the subject of several major instances of ‘malice and cruelty’. Bertha Dorset sabotages Lily’s opportunity to marry Percy Gryce and later publicly humiliates her, sacrificing Lily to save her own pride. Gus Trenor tricks Lily into being alone with him, insults her, and tries to take physical advantage of her. Grace Stepney turns her aunt against Lily, causing her disininheritance. Selden assumes the worst and abandons her after seeing her leave Trenor’s house.

While Lily is victimized by several people, Undine is the source of the ‘malice and cruelty’ directed at Ralph. She lies, deceives, and uses him, ultimately deserting him and trying to take away his son. Wharton shows both Lily and Ralph as pawns in meeting other people’s needs.

As Joslin notes, “Men, as well as women, may be victims of a ‘frivolous
society” (85). However, a major difference in the structure of each story is the role of the victim. In the House of Mirth, Lily is the protagonist and her victimization is the primary vehicle for the social satire. In The Custom of the Country, Ralph is a catalyst for the development of Undine, and, while his role as victim serves to intensify her characterization and the social commentary, he is a secondary character. Wharton has chosen to refute the attitude of patriarchal society, which assumes the strength of men and the weakness of women. Although Lily is constantly portrayed as a “victim of a world that had made possible her loveliness and inevitable her limitations” (Howe 13), she is not depicted entirely as a weak person. Some of her actions are based on moral grounds (her decisions to burn Bertha’s letters and to pay off her debt to Trenor require moral courage), but “...in the end, however brave the individual shows herself to be, she falls a victim to forces which no individual could cope with alone” (Walton 45). Ralph, however, is directly victimized by a strong-willed woman, and his reactions to her dominance, as well as others, characterizes him as a weak man. Ralph cannot control Undine’s spending; he backs down every time he is challenged or confronted; he is taken advantage of by his employer; and even his grandfather ridicules him. Yet Wharton sympathizes with both Lily and Ralph, demonstrating her overriding concern for human dignity and pity for the weakness in human nature.

Although Wharton’s empathy extends to both genders, she expresses an attitude of male superiority prevalent in her society in her depiction of the
relationships between Selden and Lily and Ralph and Clare. Wharton introduces Ralph early in the novel through his mental musings, in which he expresses a “half-contemptuous pity” (80) for Clare because she chose Van Degan over him. He thinks of Clare as “light and frivolous, without strength of will or depth of purpose” (195). Ralph grows closer to Clare after his divorce and Undine’s expressed intent to remarry, yet he observes that Clare is “no more intelligent; she followed him no farther in his flights” (395) than she did in their youth and she does not always get the point of the discussion. Yet with Clare, Ralph “renewed the long rambles of their youth, and once more the summer fields and woods seemed full of magic presence” (395). Clare loves him and encourages the romantic, idealistic side of his personality. While Clare’s attraction to Ralph brings him comfort and healing, the attraction between Lily and Selden aids in her downfall. From the very beginning of The House of Mirth, Selden sees Lily as a beautiful object, musing that “she must have cost a great deal to make” (7). He is quick to condemn her actions, is always aware of her social manipulations, yet admires her beauty and refinement. Selden stimulates Lily’s romantic, idealistic visions, yet in a negative context. While he raises Lily’s awareness of her desire to live freely, he makes her acutely aware of her inability to do so. Selden increases her mindfulness of, and her frustration with, the conflict between her personal desires and social necessity. Throughout the novel, Selden serves as her conscience, holding a dominant position over Lily. As Wolff observes, Lily is dependent on Selden’s reactions as the only way to see
her ‘real’ self, and “she perceives that self as increasingly disgusting and
loathsome” (129). His presence at Bellemont causes Lily to lose her opportunity
to marry Percy Gryce, and Lily’s knowledge of how Selden would perceive her
actions leads her to burn Bertha Dorset’s letters and destroy her last opportunity
to resurrect her social position.

Lily and Ralph’s romantic spirits, their inner selves, surface when they are
in the company of Selden and Clare. Yet the good Clare cannot save Ralph nor
can the idealistic Selden save Lily. Personal survival is not dependent upon
either a nurturing woman or a rescuing man. Survival is dependent upon
choices, and choices are influenced by outside forces, including well-meaning
friends and lovers, upbringing, social pressures and financial need. The path of
Lily’s downfall is paved with fatal choices: she chooses to visit with Selden rather
than go to church with Percy Gryce; she chooses to live beyond her means; she
chooses to borrow money from Gus Trenor; she chooses to help Bertha Dorset
to deceive her husband; she chooses to burn Selden’s letters; she chooses to
remain independent with no means to do so; and, finally, she chooses to risk her
life for the sake of sleep. Ralph is also a victim of poor decisions: he decides to
marry Undine; he decides to turn his back on the divorce terms; he decides to
seek Elmer Moffatt’s financial help; and finally, he decides to kill himself.

The plights of Lily and Ralph demonstrate Wharton’s “bitter scorn of a
materialistic and indifferent society” (Lawson 38). Wharton is criticizing the
materialism and indifference of people on both sides of upper society’s fence—
the invaders and the old New York aristocrats. However, the motivations of these groups vary. The materialism of the invaders centers not on a cultivated love of fine things but on a less refined pursuit of pleasure and social prominence, as described by Cary Fisher in her description of the Gormers:

what they want is to have a good time, and to have it in their own way. They gave the other thing a few months’ trial...but suddenly they decided that the whole business bored them and that what they wanted was a crowd they could really feel at home with...Mattie Gormer has got aspirations still; women always have; but she’s awfully easy going, and Sam won’t be bothered, and they both like to be the most important people in sight, so they’ve started a sort of continuous performance of their own, a kind of social Coney Island, where everybody is welcome who can make noise enough and doesn’t put on airs. (374)

In contrast, the established families of New York are materialistic in terms of refinement, comfort, and the aesthetic pleasure of fine things. Indifference in the world of the Marvels and the Dagonets takes the form of “cultivated inaction” (48). As Ralph shows in his slow recovery from the divorce, New York aristocrats wear an “outer skin of indifference” (297), a cool pretense to distance themselves from life’s improprieties or painful experiences. Lily often displays an outer facade of cool indifference in dealing with indelicate or uncomfortable social situations. Selden’s admiration for her style of behavior echoes the values of New York aristocracy:
But what especially struck him was the way in which she detached herself, by a hundred undefinable shades, from the persons who most abounded in her own style...her grace cheapening the other women's smartness as her finely discriminated silences made their chatter dull.

(346)

But Lily’s ‘discriminated silences’ help to destroy her; she does not speak out against untrue gossip about herself; she does not tell Dorset about his wife’s indiscretions; and she does not reveal her possession of Selden’s letters to Bertha Dorset. She chooses silence over saving herself. Ralph’s silences also feed his victimization. He does not protest Undine’s divorcing him; he does not voice any terms in the divorce decree; and, instead of telling anyone about his failure to obtain the money for custody of his son, he kills himself. Wharton shows the tragic results of passivity, malice and cruelty in a self-absorbed society.

In a letter to William Crary Brownell in 1904, Wharton defended her style of writing and choice of subject matter, stating “I write about what I see, what I happen to be nearest to” (Lewis & Lewis 91). The characterization of Lily and Ralph reflect what Wharton was ‘nearest to’ in respect to her upbringing, her marriage, and her sexual awakening. Her frame of reference in creating Lily was her personal frustration with marriage and her desire for male companionship, as well as her struggle between intellectual and artistic pursuits and her conventional role in society. Wharton expresses this struggle through Lily’s
constant choices that break with the social order, and through her dream of independence, “a republic of the spirit” (108). At the age of twenty-nine and still unmarried, Lily “was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself” (61). Lily’s gravitation toward Selden and her need for his company reflects Wharton’s own dependence upon and pleasure in male companionship, especially her friendship with Walter Berry. Wharton found in Berry “the place of perfect understanding” and “someone to scold her” (Lewis 478-479). Lily sought in Selden “a friend who won’t be afraid to say disagreeable [things]” (12) and with whom she would not have to pretend or be guarded in her words or actions.

In the time period between the publication of *The House of Mirth* in 1905 and the completion of *The Custom of the Country* in 1913, Wharton experienced “a love affair, extensive travel, changes of residence, illnesses, and a disintegrating marriage” which ended in divorce (Benstock 283). These circumstances contributed to a new, passionate depth in Wharton’s writing. She created Ralph from a frame of reference colored by her fervent affair with Fullerton and the painful struggle between her independence and being in love. Wharton’s shifting from a female victim to a male victim was perhaps a conscious choice, stemming from her desire to express the sexually passionate and emotional aspects of love that she felt intensely with Fullerton. Wharton was raised in a society where “It was not ‘nice’ for girls to have [sexual] feelings” (Wolff 207); to draw on her experiences with Fullerton, she needed to use a male
voice. Her affair with Fullerton echoes in Ralph's infatuation with Undine, in the rise of passion within him as he falls in love, in his obsession with her physical traits, and in the disillusioning reality of Undine's true nature. In contrast to *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country* abounds with allusions to Ralph's sexual feelings, reflecting Wharton's heightened sexual awareness. The first time he sat next to Undine "Under his quiet words, he was throbbing with the sense of her proximity" (75). While on their honeymoon "his universe had shrunk to the palm of a hand...in the mystic depths whence his passion sprang" (135). Wharton repeatedly creates images of Ralph's physical involvement with Undine, describing his "kneeling at her side and putting his arm around her" (228), his laying his cheek against hers (143), and pressing her body to him (143). Ralph's physical response to her beauty is clear; he laughs "in pure enjoyment of her beauty" (163); he feels "the tempestuous heat of her beauty" (164); and "the sense of her softness woke a momentary warmth in his veins" (228). Undine's lies and deception leave him hopeless and disillusioned, but he still maintains "an unquenchable ache for her nearness, her smile, her touch" (197). Even after their divorce, her sexual impact on him lingers: "It was a long time since Ralph had allowed himself to think of her, and as he did so the overwhelming fact of her beauty became present to him again" (375) and he feels "in his veins the glow of rapture" (383) that captured him when they became engaged. Moments before his suicide, the memory of her presence comes over him again: "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” (408). Ralph falls headlong into a love which Wharton describes as “the imaginative man’s indestructible dream of a rounded passion” (85). Perhaps this ‘dream’ echoes her own vision, and hope, as she fell in love with Fullerton.

While Wharton’s sexual awakening and romantic intensity reverberate in *The Custom of the Country*, her attitude toward love and passion as reflected in *The House of Mirth* is one of innocence and constraint. Through Lily’s reaction to Selden, Wharton reveals a skepticism toward heartfelt emotion and a lack of physical passion. Lily questions her infatuation with Selden, expressing an uncertainty and perhaps an underlying distrust of her feelings:

Lily...was throbbing inwardly with a rush of thoughts...She could not herself have explained the sense of buoyancy which seemed to lift and swing her above the sun-suffused world at her feet. Was it love, she wondered, or a mere fortuitous combination of happy thoughts and sensations...the spell of a perfect afternoon, the scent of the fading woods, the thought of the dullness she had fled from? (102)

There is a contrast in Wharton’s use of the word “throbbing” in her descriptions of Ralph and Lily that characterizes a distinct difference in emphasis: Ralph physically throbs sitting close to Undine; Lily’s mind is pounding with a rush of thoughts, not a physical reaction. Lily’s response to Selden is dominated by an intellectual awareness rather than a physical passion; his presence challenges
her thoughts and makes her see things differently. Her physical reactions are contradicted by her defensiveness; when she is alone with Selden, she feels her pulse quicken but she withdraws, resists, or pulls away. Wharton associates Lily’s physical response to Selden with feelings of stress rather than excitement. The author’s few references to physical intimacy between Lily and Selden are not the “tempestuous heat” or “glowing rapture” that Ralph expresses, but images lacking the aggressiveness of passion. Wharton likens their physical contact to “loosened leaves drawn to earth” (117) and Lily’s leaning on Selden to “the drop of tired wings” (77). Her description of their kissing lacks any emotion, seeming more like a staged scene than a moment of passion: “her face turned to him with the soft motion of a flower. His own met it slowly, and their lips touched. She drew back and rose from her seat” (222). Of course, according to the social mores of the time, Wharton would be naturally reticent to make Lily a sexual being. The lack of heated emotion in this scene could also reflect Wharton’s own lack of experience, as well as social taboos. Ironically, although her characterization of Lily lacks sexual passion, Lily is wrongly judged and condemned for sexual misbehavior with Selden, Gus Trenor, and George Dorset. The sexual innuendoes in The House of Mirth, specifically the scenes between Lily and Gus Trenor, depict sexuality as a sleazy shadow cast on social propriety. The shift from forbidden or improper sexuality in The House of Mirth to the association of Ralph’s passion with love in The Custom of the Country
suggests Wharton’s own emergence from a sexually repressed female to a passionate woman.

Like Lily and Ralph, Wharton expressed a duality in her own nature, reflecting the qualities of a boundary being moving between romanticism and reality. In a letter to Sara Norton in 1902, she quotes Goethe’s Faust, saying “Two souls, alas, do dwell within my breast” (Lewis 72). In 1908, she writes to Morton Fullerton about their shared need for the aesthetic side of life as well as the sharpness of reality: “Because you and I are almost the only people I know who feel the ’natural magic,’ au-delà, dream-side of things, and yet need the netteté, the line—in thinking, in conduct...in feeling, too” (Lewis & Lewis 151). Wharton’s life vacillated between the romantic world of her writing and travels and the realities of her social life, managing a household, and financially supporting her husband. There are echoes of this vacillation in Lily and Ralph. Lily’s romantic world is filled with dreams of independence and luxury, yet she must continually focus on the reality of survival, trying to manage financially and to find a suitable man to marry. Ralph more strongly parallels Wharton as a member of old New York society who longs to be a writer and must deal with the reality of supporting a dependent spouse.

The characterizations of Lily and Ralph also demonstrate Wharton’s skepticism about love and marriage. Lily’s reluctance to marry dull men who were prospective partners reflects Wharton’s own yearning to reject an unhappy marriage. Her marriage to Teddy was filled with conflict and frustration; he did
not share Edith’s intellectual nature, and their relationship lacked physical passion. At the time of the writing of *The House of Mirth*, their marriage was deteriorating. Lily saw marriage not as a satisfying emotional relationship, but as a means for survival and a chance for the joy and comfort of luxury. Wharton portrays love in *The House of Mirth* as a fickle and fleeting emotion, dependent upon appearance rather than reality and controlled by practicality rather than passion. Lily restrains her feelings for Selden because of his lack of money. Selden’s love for Lily is ruled by social propriety and is easily overcome by his misinterpretation and mistrust of her actions. Love cannot be relied upon; Selden’s love comes too late to save Lily Bart.

While Lily ultimately wants to marry for money, Ralph marries for love, and love for Ralph is warm passion and rapturous dreams. However, Wharton paints a horrific picture of marriage in the coupling of Undine Spragg and Ralph Marvell that echoes her own unhappy marriage. Undine does not share Ralph’s intellectual and aesthetic nature. Just as Teddy drained Wharton’s finances, so does Undine live extravagantly. Wharton spends a great deal of time on the characterization of Ralph, sympathizing greatly with the height of his passion and the pain of his fall. Her own passion for Fullerton reverberates through the characterization of Ralph. In the early moments of infatuation, he muses on his inner world, “a thronged and echoing place when Undine Spragg appeared on its threshold” (81) and Wharton, in her “Love Diary,” writes of a world of her own creation and knowing “what it was to have some one [Fullerton] enter into that
world & live there” (Price & McBride 682). Ralph’s honeymoon with Undine “hand in hand with him, embodying that spirit of shifting magic” (133) reflects Wharton’s romantic vision of herself with treasures “in magic ships from enchanted islands” (Lewis & Lewis 135) which she longs to give to Fullerton. Wharton repeats her own anxiety over Fullerton’s lack of correspondence (Lewis & Lewis 154) in Ralph’s agonizing wait for letters from Undine while she is in Europe, inventing excuses to leave his office early to check the mail and being crushed by her not writing. The shock of Undine’s leaving Ralph and his subsequent agonizing shame parallel Wharton’s humiliation and pain when her romance ended with Fullerton: “You hurt me—disillusionized me—and when you left me I was more deeply yours” (Price & McBride 671). Wharton expresses this lingering effect of passionate love in The Custom of the Country: Ralph never completely gets over Undine. Ironically, love might have been able to save Lily Bart (if Selden had reached her in time), but love destroys Ralph. Wharton has moved from a romantic vision of unattainable love in The House of Mirth to the tragic consequence of a thwarted love in The Custom of the Country.

Wharton poignantly illustrates the complexity and vulnerability of two characters who border conventional society and aesthetic idealism. Lily and Ralph, caught continually between their own self-delusions and reality, between child-like naiveté and adult responsibilities, and between their inner and public selves, suffer dire consequences in this boundary being existence. Their victimization is not only a statement of what a ‘frivolous society’ can destroy, but
a confirmation of the power of upbringing, personalities, money, love, and passion in directing an individual’s choices and ultimate fate. They both have delusions about their strength and abilities. Lily believes in her beauty and artistic charm; Ralph believes that he can be a successful writer. Yet her beauty does not save her and Ralph’s creativity does not provide him the means to survive. Their dreams and visions are broken by upbringings entrenched in denial and pretense that result in their inability to defend themselves, as well as a cruel society and a lack of income. Lily and Ralph are trapped between meeting the requirements of a mercenary society and preserving their private selves. When their illusions are shattered and the reality is unbearable, they cannot survive.
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