



Money and Marriage in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

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Abstract: The present paper discusses two prominent features of Edith Wharton's fiction as Wharton has carefully portrayed in her first and most famous novel *The House of Fame*. They are marriage and money. Money and marriage have played a definite and decisive role in Edith Wharton's life. This autobiographical touch has infused into her novel a characteristic fervour and significance that are personally interesting and creatively luminous. They bring before the readers a vivid picture of her bubbling, bright youth and of how the fashionable New York society of her times has flourished fastening itself on financial prosperity and prominence and proper marital status and connections of men and women.

Key Words: money, marriage, aristocracy, societal

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) is one of the famous American Women Novelists whose contribution to American literature is exemplarily significant. She was born Edith Newbold Jones in 1862. As she was born in an aristocratic family, it was not easy for her to take up the profession of writing. There were social restrictions and inhibitions. The society looked upon the practice of art as mean and undignified. As Candace and Clare Colquitt put it, "Edith Wharton, born Edith Newbold Jones in 1862, entered into the careful and closed ranks of the New York aristocracy, defied the limitations of a society that did not condone the practice of art for men and women, and for over forty years seized her life through writing" (537).

Edith Wharton's passion for reading and writing did not diminish "though as a young girl, she had been explicitly forbidden to read novels" (Waid 539). Wharton has displayed her expertise in visual arts like painting, sculpture, architecture and gardening but she is popularly known and acclaimed for her fiction. She is the author of twenty-two books – novels and novellas and nearly a hundred short stories. Among her novellas, *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *Summer* (1917) have redefined much attention and acclaim. Of her novels, the best known and appreciated are *The*

House of Mirth (1905), *The Reef* (1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *The Age of Innocence*. She also wrote poems at the age of sixteen and her early poems were published in the Atlantic and New York newspaper. The reader can come across passages and descriptions in her novels which reveal her inherent poetic imagination and power.

Wharton belonged to the closed ranks of the New York aristocracy and she was very well aware of the customs of the elite. Her novel *The House of Mirth* develops a critique of American society at the beginning of the twentieth century. In *Mirth* Wharton focuses her attention mostly on two themes – money and marriage. Money is the be-all, end-all symbol to most of the characters in the novel. Wharton depicts the upper-class society which is built on money. Marriage, one may say, is one important and imperative stage in a woman's life strongly recommended and advocated for the fulfilment of a woman's life by the society. Eileen Connell, commenting on the theme of marriage, remarks: "Wharton explores some of the disastrous consequences of a marriage institution that is founded on spurious notions of a woman's place in society" (558).

Lily Bart is the protagonist of the novel *The House of Mirth*. Wharton has portrayed her heroine as a beautiful young woman of twenty-nine years old. Lily is a well-born and well-educated. Wharton unveils a part of Lily's past and details about her wealthy family are presented. Wharton describes Lily in such a way that one can notice her own presence as a representation of a wealthy life:

As she moved beside him, with her long light step, Selden was conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her nearness: in the modeling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair – was it ever so slightly