



Glimpses of the Moon and the Transatlantic Debate over Marital Reform

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“Oh, if only I were free—free—free!” Edith Wharton wrote to her lover in 1911. “Isn’t it awful to have a chain snaffled around one’s neck for all time?” (Lee 389). Wharton was nearing fifty and having an affair with Morton Fullerton, a charming, younger, and bisexual journalist. Fullerton proved something of a cad; right before launching the affair with Wharton, he became engaged to his first cousin, who was also his stepsister. But he also provided Wharton with a spiritual, intellectual, and sexual intimacy all the more welcome because of the “chain” she refers to in her letter: her husband, Teddy, to whom Wharton had been yoked for over two decades when she met Fullerton.¹

Money and sex, as we so often hear, pose the two biggest problems in many marriages, and the Whartons were no exception. To the manner born, Teddy lived on an allowance from his wealthy family—until he began living on his wife’s inheritance and royalties. In 1909 he made the astounding confession that he had speculated with \$50,000 of Wharton’s money (over \$1,000,000 in today’s dollars), losing much of it and using the rest to set up a mistress in a Boston apartment. In addition, from the start, according to biographer R.W.B. Lewis, the Whartons’ sex life had been “a disaster” (50).

Teddy suffered, moreover, from severe mental problems—an “affection of the brain,” according to his doctor, though today he would probably be diagnosed as bipolar (Lee 370). As Wharton’s friend (and coauthor of her first book, *The Decoration of Houses*) Ogden Codman characterized her marital nightmare, she was “tied to a crazy person, who is only just sane enough not to be locked up, but too crazy to be out” (Lee 386). To another close friend, Henry James, the marriage seemed “utterly inconceivable” (Benstock 55). No wonder that, in the words of biographer Hermione Lee, “marital bondage” would become one of Wharton’s key literary themes (363).²

While Wharton’s fiction does indeed provide a horror gallery of marriages, she believed in the institution and was interested in what could make marriage work. *Glimpses of the Moon* (1922) provides an important answer, one that also sheds light on its author’s complex reaction to modernity. Better-known novels such as *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913) critique traditional marriages predicated on the economic dependence of women, and in this volume Sharon Kim examines the two-way objectification that characterizes Ralph Marvell and Undine’s marriage in the latter novel. Marvell is nothing if not a traditionalist, but *Glimpses* examines a self-consciously modern marriage. As one of its characters puts it, explicitly linking marriage and modernity, “Everything’s changed nowadays; why shouldn’t marriage . . . too?”³

A best-seller in its day made into a popular film with dialogue written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Glimpses* has not done well with critics. For one thing, commentators have found it odd that so deliberately modern a book fails to register the impact of World War I—and indeed that the era should be so vaguely delineated, especially given Wharton’s generally precise historical sense. In addition, critics have described *Glimpses* as a feeble reworking of the themes and characters of *The House of Mirth*. Third and most important to my interests, many cringe at the conclusion of *Glimpses*, which celebrates an essentialized and even reactionary notion of motherhood. Cynthia Griffin Wolff criticizes the “pat, sentimental denouement” that brings the estranged couple back together, while Melanie V. Dawson even more sharply condemns the “retrograde social roles” and “incongruous” ending of *Glimpses*, which she finds makes for a “markedly unsatisfying” conclusion (347, 96).⁴

In this essay I offer a heretofore unremarked historical context for Wharton’s portrayal of Nick and Susy Lansing’s marriage—one that clarifies

what is indeed modern about it while also providing a new way of thinking about the novel's conclusion. Hildegard Hoeller, one of the few critics to see *Glimpses* comparing favorably with Wharton's earlier work, describes the ending as "cynical" and "ironic" and contends the Lansings remain "in search of values that have no reference point, within or beyond the novel." As persuasive as I find Hoeller's general argument that an ongoing "dialogue" between realism and sentimentalism structures Wharton's corpus, I see no irony modifying the sentimental ending of *Glimpses* (126, 135). Moreover, as this essay will demonstrate, there are very definite historical and cultural reference points for the values that Nick and Susy embrace by novel's end. And since Wharton's own marriage and divorce are such important markers in her biography, I hope this new historical context will chart a path for fresh readings of marriage throughout Wharton's novels.

Glimpses was published in 1922, five years before the appearance of *Companionate Marriage* by Judge Ben Lindsey. That best-seller urges that marriage should be an emotional rather than economic relationship, egalitarian rather than patriarchal, and that this reorientation necessitates couples having free access to birth control and divorce. Family historians define the companionate marriage movement as a watershed that they attribute to Lindsey's text in particular and the 1920s shift in sexual mores more generally. In the words of one recent historian, the marital ideal shifted "from a patriarchal, procreative institution into a relationship premised on equal sexual desires and mutual emotional fulfillment" (Davis 1137).⁵ Dale M. Bauer and other literary critics have linked *Glimpses* and other Wharton novels, particularly *The Gods Arrive* (1932), to the 1920s companionate marriage movement.

However, as I argue in *Until Choice Do Us Part: Marriage Reform in the Progressive Era*, such ideas were popularized more than a decade earlier. Writers like sexologist Havelock Ellis, along with his wife, Edith, mystic socialist Edward Carpenter, sociologist and anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons, and feminists Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Olive Schreiner, and Ellen Key mounted a hugely influential attack on marital norms. In doing so, they also put forward an alternative that I call progressive marital reform—but let me stress that I use the word *progressive* as a historical descriptor, not as an evaluation or an endorsement. The marital reformers offer a consistently cosmopolitan perspective such as this volume defines as central to Wharton. As Meredith L. Goldsmith and Emily J. Orlando outline in

the introduction, there are two models of cosmopolitanism operative in Wharton's corpus: a "liberal" version that tolerates difference and a more thoroughgoing "immersive" cosmopolitanism that fosters the remaking of identity on both national and individual levels. The progressive marriage reformers manifest a variant of immersive cosmopolitanism predicated on their belief that remaking identity on the level of the marital couple was the key to individual happiness as well as social progress. Havelock Ellis captures the logic of this idea when he describes marriage as "the figure in miniature" of social life (*Eonism* 523). The marriage reformers originated from various countries—the Ellises and Carpenter were British, Parsons and Gilman were American, Schreiner was from South Africa, and Key was from Sweden—and like Wharton, they all traveled internationally. More important, the reformers read (and often cited and otherwise endorsed) each other's works, and so despite differences of opinion, they collectively established an intertextual and cosmopolitan rationale for marital reform. Most important, all had substantial readerships in Europe and also in the United States, and so readers learned the new ideas about marriage were not confined to national borders.

Progressive marital reform boils down to a few basic premises. First, the reformers believed the economic arrangement of wage-earning husband and dependent wife deforms marriage. (That idea resonates, of course, for even the most casual reader of Wharton.) Second—and a notion that will prove especially important to my analysis of *Glimpses*—they maintained that true marriage is not created by external authorities such as law or religion or by social sanction. To the contrary, only individual partners could determine the authenticity of a union redefined as fundamentally private and sanctioned by emotion. Third, reformers sought to replace what they saw as compulsory monogamy with voluntary monogamy. Fourth, they championed what would ultimately be achieved only with "no fault" divorce (which swept the states, beginning with California in the 1970s), believing that spouses should be able to separate for their own reasons rather than needing to fulfill a state's statutory ground. That these views now seem commonsensical is an indicator of how influential the progressive reformers' ideas have proven to be. A fifth premise, however, has not worn as well with time. As much as the reformers championed unions of what Gilman termed "class equals," they backed off from their egalitarianism as well as their endorsement of privacy and voluntarism when children entered the

picture (220). At that point, the reformers believed, social considerations trumped individual concerns.

As I will show, the logic of the Lansing marriage, particularly its trajectory, tracks very closely with the progressive reformers' ideals. I offer this argument with the proviso that Wharton herself casts a very critical eye on some of the same concepts in other works, including "The Reckoning" (1902). In that early story, a couple marries with the express agreement to structure their relationship based on "the New Ethics," which the narrator characterizes as meaning that spouses need to "keep faith [only] with themselves, and not . . . live together for a moment after complete accord had ceased to exist." Predicated on the idea that either spouse can divorce the other at will, such a voluntary marriage need never turn into an "imprisonment." While that word anticipates the "chain" that Wharton would use to describe, nine years later, her own marriage, in "The Reckoning" she satirizes marriage predicated on open-door ideals. The story pivots on the husband's falling in love with another woman and expecting his wife to release him immediately, in deference to "the ideas on which our marriage was founded." The problem is that the wife loves her husband profoundly, but because of their premarital pact, she lacks any moral ground from which to attempt to keep him. She finds herself therefore "victim of the theories she renounced." To my knowledge, Wharton rarely refers to any of the progressive marital reformers by name, but "The Reckoning" makes clear that she understood their theories.⁶

Glimpses begins with the Lansings' honeymoon, and Wharton immediately establishes that they married under similarly negotiated terms. They pledge that either shall be free to terminate the arrangement. In an interesting reversal of customary gender roles, Susy proposes to Nick, which the narrator renders in indirect discourse: "Why shouldn't they marry; belong to each other openly and honourably, . . . and with the definite understanding that whenever either . . . got the chance to do better he or she should be immediately released?" (18–19). This arrangement theoretically precludes any need for "hypocrisy" or "alibis" because, as Susy explains to a friend, they have "agree[d] that each will give the other a hand up when either of us wants a change. We've not married to spy and lie, and nag each other" (41–42). Moreover, the couple agrees in advance on a frankly mercenary union—only instead of marriage as a "career" or "vocation" for the wife, as Undine Spragg embraces in *The Custom of the Country* (8) and Lily Bart

rejects in *The House of Mirth*, the Lansings both plan to live off of wedding gifts and the largesse of wealthy friends delighted to host the stylish newlyweds. In other words, the Lansings “frankly entered into a business contract for their mutual advantage” (259). They consider their rather cynical innovation on tradition an “experiment.” Self-consciously modern, Susy proffers that “I don’t suppose it’s ever been tried before” (18).

In fact—and as “The Reckoning” confirms—Wharton was quite aware that ideas about negotiated marriage had been circulating for two decades. Sociologist Elsie Clews Parsons, for one, in her controversial 1906 textbook, *The Family*, advocated a precursor to companionate marriage that she called “trial marriage.” The idea sounds pretty tame today: couples should experiment with living together and be free to part without “public condemnation” (349). Ironically, Parsons herself was publicly condemned for advocating trial marriage. The *New York Herald*, for one, called *The Family* the most “radical” work on marriage ever published and denounced its “morality of the barnyard” and “diabolical” tendencies (Deacon 68–69). Parsons’s own husband, an attorney and congressman, did not read the book when it appeared, assuming *The Family* would be too extreme for his taste (90). Popular lecturer Edith Ellis likewise encouraged young lovers to consider themselves “novitiates for marriage.” She believed that romantic partners should enter a clearly demarcated probationary period, just like novitiate nuns before taking vows. Living together on an experimental basis, Ellis believed, “would . . . minimize the gambling element in modern unions, and pave the way to a true monogamy” (13). This notion of “true monogamy” is critical to *Glimpses*, and I will return to it shortly.

The Lansings’ agreement on the necessity of building an exit plan into their marriage reflects also the acceptance of divorce within their globe-trotting set. Susy grew up surrounded by “denationalized” people—an apparent Russian turns out to be American, a seeming New Yorker actually hails from Rome (40). In its treatment of the linked themes of cosmopolitanism and divorce, *Glimpses* marks a sharp break from *The Age of Innocence* (1920), published only two years earlier but set in the 1870s. In that novel, the captivating American-born Ellen Olenska leaves her abusive Polish husband and returns to New York, thereby scandalizing an earlier generation that does not believe in divorce, particularly when initiated by a woman. In *Glimpses*, however, Wharton identifies the entire cast of characters as more or less transnational and links that quality with their enthusiasm for