



Transient Marriages and Fractured Lives: A Familial Study of Edith Wharton's *The Children*

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Abstract

Family has long served as a primary object of examination for scholars studying social structures and their role in shaping human destiny. The growth rate in divorce, increasing cohabitation, declining interest in formal marriage, and decreasing birth rates particularly in American society generated significant concern among family theorists and sociologists. Because family functions as the essential bridge mediating between the individual and society, defining its boundaries remains complex as its meaning varies across cultures and historical eras. This study provides a comprehensive familial analysis of survival in Edith Wharton's 1928 novel *The Children*. Set against the backdrop of wealthy American expatriates in Europe, the novel illustrates the devastating consequences of parental divorce, remarriage, and domestic abandonment on children. Utilizing psychological, economic and sociological theoretical frameworks including insights from Sigmund Freud, William Goode, and Andrew J. Cherlin—this paper examines how parental irresponsibility disintegrates the family institution and forces young individuals to fight for emotional survival. The study reveals how Wharton critiques the commodification of marriage and underscores the plight of children left to navigate a fragmented social landscape.

Keywords: Family, social structure, survival, separation, emotional development, divorce, parental irresponsibility.

Introduction

When *The Children* was published in 1928, Edith Wharton was sixty-six years old and living permanently in France, entertaining friends without children of her own. The novel belongs to the third distinct phase of her writing career (1920–1930). In *The Children*, Wharton undertakes a rigorous examination of the profound consequences inflicted upon children due to their parents' frequent separations, divorces, and serial remarriages. Although the narrative is set in Europe, most characters are wealthy Americans living abroad. Wharton explores the superficial lives of millionaires devoted to pleasure, gambling, yachting, and seasonal travel, unconcerned with their offspring's welfare, leaving them to nurses, governesses, and tutors. The narrative unfolds through Martin Boyne, a forty-six-year-old bachelor and civil engineer who has worked across the globe. Martin becomes involved in the lives of these runaway children fleeing quarrelsome parents. However, as Martin is drawn toward Judith, his affection for Rose Sellars diminishes. Serving as a trial guardian, Martin's attempts to navigate his relationships with Rose and Judith culminate in personal loneliness. This paper investigates early twentieth-century American family dynamics, analyzing how love, marriage, and divorce are depicted in Wharton's text through established sociological and psychological theories.

Theoretical Foundations of the Family

Theories concerning the structural role and dynamics of the family can be categorized under three primary discipline heads: psychological, economic, and sociological. While disciplines like law, politics, theology, and feminism also articulate distinct domestic frameworks, psychological, economic, and sociological perspectives offer the most comprehensive foundation for literary analysis. From a psychological perspective, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic paradigm asserts that the fundamental structure of the human mind is formed during early childhood under direct parental influence. In *The Family*, sociologist William Goode constructs a model based on relational patterns established between husband and wife, parents and

children, and the family and society. Goode ranks sociological theories above purely economic or psychological frameworks because sociology accounts for how domestic institutions mediate cultural norms.

Affluence, Wealth, and Moral Decadence

In *The Children*, Edith Wharton identifies extreme financial wealth as a primary catalyst behind domestic collapse, noting that "the only trouble with them is that they're too rich" (63). Unburdened by economic labor, the Wheaters and their social cohort live in a perpetual cycle of vacationing, swimming, yachting, sunbathing, gambling, and superficial romance. Unorthodox ideas of romantic love, combined with boundless time and capital, encourage these elites to experiment continually with marriage and divorce. This hedonistic lifestyle inflicts severe damage on their children. A stark illustration is Doll Westway, a friend of Judith who lived in hotels following her mother's endless divorces and remarriages, became addicted to drugs at fifteen, and committed suicide.

Differing Attitudes Toward Marriage

For Martin Boyne, marriage is an ideal carrying profound emotional weight. Following his meeting with Judith, his perception of Rose shifts; he begins to view her as an overbearing presence. To Martin, genuine love is as delicate as a work of fine art:

"Again they faced each other, guardedly, apprehensively, as if something fragile and precious, which they had been carrying together, had slipped between their fingers and been broken. He felt that, if he glanced at the floor, he might see the glittering fragments . . ." (Wharton 220).

When Martin returns to Rose after Judith's rejection, Rose agrees to take him back and adopt Blanca and Terry, though she refuses to serve as governess to the entire flock. Unable to manage these emotional complexities, Martin retreats into his engineering work, acting as a typical Wharton protagonist who blunders at crucial moments.

In contrast, Cliffe and Joyce Wheeler view marriage as a disposable hobby. Martin summarizes their shallow perspective:

"...the real wilderness is the world we live in; packing up our tents every few weeks for another move . . . And the marriages just like tents - folded up and thrown away when you've done with them" (Wharton 23).

While Martin and Rose end up in isolated loneliness, Joyce hypocritically preaches about the "sanctity of marriage" while actively undermining it:

"Oh, well; Cliffe.. . yes.. . It was awfully dear and sweet of Martin to say that he was glad she and Cliffe had come together again, and she was glad too ... and there was no denying that Cliffe had got into dreadfully bad hands when she left him.. . Utterly demoralized and cowed by that beastly Lacrosse woman And the money pouring out like water Yes, she, Joyce, had seen it was her duty to take him back; and so she had. Because she still believed in the sanctity of marriage, in spite of everything. She hoped Martin did too? For if you didn't, what was there left to hold society together? But all the same, if one came to feel that by living with a man, even if he was one's husband, one was denying one's Ideal: that was awful too, wasn't it? Didn't Martin think it was awful?" (Wharton 53–54).

This comically self-righteous posture underscores Joyce's hypocrisy. She later divorces Cliffe again for Mr. Dobree, a mature lawyer who forces her to realize her past mistakes and works to protect the children.

Divorce, Separation, and Childhood Trauma

By the 1920s, legal shifts, industrialization, and changing social attitudes removed much of the historical stigma surrounding divorce. In *The Children*, Joyce divorces three times, while Cliffe marries three times and engages in numerous extramarital affairs. Judith identifies her parents' aimlessness as the root cause of their instability: "... Father and mother can't make up their minds where to go next, and it's always when they've got nothing particular to do that they quarrel. . . And if they get wrangling again what in the world is to become of us children?" (Wharton 62).

Because her parents abandon their responsibilities, Judith assumes adult duties, missing her childhood and looking old at sixteen. Her youth has been "robbed of illusions by a forced participation in the emotional difficulties of her elders" (Wharton 213). The proliferation of stepparents creates severe identity confusion. Wharton notes a young girl at Biarritz who hands out typed tables of her parents' various marriages and her own successive adoptions to playmates (41). Children are treated like pets by stepparents; when Prince Buondelmonte's new wife attempts to claim custody, Judith delivers a fierce retort:

"What? Because you've just married Prince Buondelmonte, and probably think he ought to have remembered to look after Bun and Beechy? Well, I think so too. Only he didn't, you see; not when they were little, and had to be wiped and changed and fed, and walked up and down when they were cutting their teeth. And now that they're big enough to cut up their own food and be good company, I suppose you and he think it would be fun to come and carry them off, the way you'd pick out a pair of Pekes at a dog-show.. . only you forget that in the meantime they've grown to love us and not you, and that they're devoted to all the other children and that it would half kill them to be separated from each other.. ." (Wharton 286).

The novel concludes on a melancholic note. Returning after three years in South America, Martin finds Zinnia playing casually with a lift-boy while he remains trapped in loneliness and Judith is seen dancing with a young man.

Conclusion

Edith Wharton's *The Children* stands as a poignant critique of changing attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and domestic responsibility in early twentieth-century American society. By contrasting the conservative idealism of Martin Boyne and Rose Sellars with the casual self-indulgence of Cliffe and Joyce Wheeler, Wharton illustrates the erosion of traditional family structures under the influence of extreme wealth. The central tragedy of the narrative is the profound emotional burden placed upon the young. Characters like Judith Wheeler are forced to sacrifice their own childhoods to provide stability for their siblings in

place of absent parents. Although the novel concludes with a superficial resolution, the underlying emotional trauma remains unhealed. Ultimately, Wharton demonstrates that when the family institution disintegrates, children pay the ultimate price for their parents' pursuit of freedom.

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