



The Old Maid

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Places Discussed

*New York City. Setting for the entire story. Delia has married well into the Ralston family and enjoys all the wealth and privileges the name Ralston affords—especially within Manhattan’s post Gramercy Park neighborhood. As Delia wakes up each morning, she looks out toward the city, appreciating what surrounds her, and then slowly considers that what surrounds her is actually the banality of the everyday life of the well to do. Although she has some regrets, feeling trapped in Ralston wealth and privileges, she is happy to be spared the fate that has befallen her unmarried cousin, Charlotte Lovell, who had a baby out of wedlock that she gave up to an orphanage.

During the period in which this story is set, the 1850’s, New York high society had no tolerance for any digression from what were perceived to be a woman’s virtues. Thus, Delia and Charlotte must keep Charlotte’s dark secret, and this Charlotte can best do by remaining unmarried. As a consequence, the unmarried Charlotte becomes a stereotype of an old maid and lives deprived of the good life to which she otherwise would be entitled. However, Charlotte recognizes the consequences of her transgression and accepts her fate.

Bibliography:

Funston, Judith E. “Clocks and Mirrors, Dreams and Destinies: Edith Wharton’s *The Old Maid*.” In *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays*, edited by Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit. New York: Garland Publishing, 1992. Uses the images of clocks and mirrors to raise larger questions about motherhood and the ways in which women can find their identity in a repressive society.

Lewis, R. W. B. *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. Discusses the novella in the context of Wharton’s conflict with publishers who initially refused to accept the work because of its theme of illegitimacy.

Rae, Catherine. *Edith Wharton’s New York Quartet*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984. The only book-length study of the four novellas that make up *Old New York*. Provides analysis and background material.

Raphael, Lev. *Edith Wharton’s Prisoners of Shame: A New Perspective on Her Neglected Fiction*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991. Discusses shame and its devastating effect on the psyche. Analyzes the novella in the context of jealousy and shame, which distort the relationship between two women and stifle both.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. Analyzes the novella in the context of Wharton’s look backward at the New York of her youth. Insists that the work is filled with a sense of disappointment and loss. Convincingly claims that the work depicts Wharton’s own fear of growing old and lonely.

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