Student

Professor

Course

Date

**The Role of Women in the Realism and Naturalism Era**

**1.0 Introduction**

Literal works are linked to diverse literary periods. Among these periods is the Realism and Naturalism period which started in 1870 and lasted until 1910 (Stromberg 10). Remarkably, this period is related to two main movements during this period. While the realism movement was centered on everyday situations and ordinary characters, naturalism depicted real people in real situations. Still, naturalists believed in forces beyond human control, such as nature, heredity, and fate (O’neil 111). In the social sphere of life, literary works published during the Realism and Naturalism period centered on common issues affecting a typical American citizen, including racism, gender roles, and social inequalities (Mazurek 105). Examples of literal works released during this period include Stephen Crane's “The Blue Hotel,” Edith Wharton’s “A Journey,” and “The Two of Us.” Edith Wharton’s “A Journey,” and “The Two of Us reflect the societal and gender roles during the Realism and Naturalism period.

**2.0 A Journey**

**2.1 Marriage and Motherhood**

Marriage and motherhood are essential aspects of any society. In the 1890s, marriage and motherhood were the essential jobs for women as per the societal standards (Mazurek 106). Particularly, married women lived a restricted life with the roles of taking care of their husbands and the house (Stromberg 15). Although wealthy families could hire someone to take care of their home, a wife was rarely allowed to pursue other opportunities. “A Journey” narrates a woman traveling by train along with her seriously ill husband. This woman had quit her teaching job earlier and moved with her husband from New York to Colorado to seek medical care. However, her husband's situation worsened, and the doctor released them to recover at home. Here, Wharton uses these scenes to depict the roles and responsibilities of a woman in American society during the Realism and Naturalism period. As represented by Wharton, society expects a woman to prioritize the needs of a man over their own. This is further elaborated as the journey commences.

Wharton also expresses women as the custodians of marriage. In the Realism and Naturalism era, marriage was the basis for the institution of family (Stromberg 115). A family is an institution that most societies consider built by love. However, that is not the case for the protagonist. Although she loves her husband, she does not wish to remain with him due to his illness. He is no longer the person she married, and things have changed in their relationship. Regardless, she remains by her side, but rather than being a wife, she mainly nurses him. Although one may argue that it would be selfish for the protagonist to leave her husband in his dark times, if the roles were reversed, the protagonist’s husband may not be expected to do the same. In other words, women have a societal role in taking responsibility for the marriage institution regardless of whether it satisfies them. This was the case in the realism and naturalism period when it was extremely difficult for a woman to get a divorce (Mazurek 104). Arguably, women were taught that endurance to the end was their only hope of heaven as they had a religious duty of submitting to their husbands in all aspects (Stromberg 122).” A Journey,” therefore, perfectly reflects the Realism and Naturalism era.

**2.2 Overburdening of Women with Responsibilities**

“A Journey” also reflects a woman's burden of responsibilities. The train starts well but soon worsens as people in the car pass judgment and her husband’s health condition gets worse. In her mind, this woman, the story’s protagonist, is eager to get home, and she imagines reuniting with her family and her husband calling her when he does not. At this point, she wants to check on him but desists and sleeps off. Besides her ailing husband, this woman has her other part of the family that she has to take care of. Wharton uses this scene to reflect on how society has overburdened a woman with responsibilities. A married woman has children and spouses to take care of that she forgets of herself. Her happiness is dependent on her family rather than herself. When she wakes up, only to find her husband dead. She nearly calls out of terror, but she remembers a scenario where a couple's child died while traveling, and they were put out in the nearest station and decided to conceal his death. After hours of evading inquiries, she gets more and more confused, such that she cannot distinguish between her spoken voice and thinking voice. Her husband’s dead face grows on her, and she can “ see him whenever she turns her vision to, and moments seem like hours (Wharton 13). This stresses how heavy the burden of responsibilities for women is. Even after the death of her husband, the woman is left with a higher burden of responsibilities that she has to bear alone. The aloneness in carrying this burden of responsibilities is depicted by her reluctance to ask for help. Here, Wharton symbolizes how society responds to women when they seek help in relieving the burden of responsibilities. Rather than comforting her, the other commuters on the train would force her to alight at the next station with her husband’s corpse without caring about how she will manage to get home. After taking some biscuits and brandy, she falls asleep. As she sleeps, thoughts of the train as her life being swept away run through her mind, and she dreams of her death and being taken away and buried. This symbolizes the fact that a woman is separated from the diverse roles set by society only after death. That is the only time society helps her. She wakes up terrified and realizes the journey is over, and she is glad the “worst” is over. The “worst” is a symbol of marriage.

**2.3 Women’s Role in Giving Hope to Others**

The societal role of women in giving hope to others is also shown in “A Journey.”When the couple gives up their pretty house and moves to Colorado, the woman protagonist cites that she had hated to stay in Colorado from the first day. Contrary to when they lived in New York, no one knew her or cared about the “good match” she had made or envied the visiting cards and new dresses that were still a surprise. This means that people in New York liked her, a common thing for people who give hope to others. Besides, her life experience gives a reader hope in life generally. Despite going through the hardship of taking care of an ailing husband, the woman did not give up or lose control at any point. She remained strong through the sickness, and even after her husband’s death, she remained strong such that no one on the train for nearly 24 hours noticed that she had lost her husband. The Realism and Naturalism era is marked by the emergence of many women-led revolutions aimed at liberating a woman from societal social and economic handicaps. More women achieved educational and civil milestones that had not been achieved earlier. For instance, Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles established the first college for African American women in 1881 (Cruea 45). By covering women as a source of hope for others, Wharton perfectly reflects the emergence of women in education and power in the Realism and Neutralism era.

**3.0 The Other Two**

**3.1 Marriage and Motherhood**

Similarly, Wharton expounds on marriage and motherhood in her story “The Other Two.” “The Other Two” covers a conflict between Mr. Waythorn and Mrs. Alice Wythorn, wealthy newlyweds. Unanticipated events lead Alice’s two ex-husbands into the public and private lives of the couple. The story starts with the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Wythorn to New York from their honeymoon after a sudden illness of Lily Haskett, Alice’s daughter from her first marriage. The fact that Alice has to be the one in custody of her daughter after the divorce from Mr. Haskett depicts the role of women in American society during the realism and naturalism era. While Mr. Haskett is free to do whatever he wants despite having a child, Alice’s life is constrained by the responsibility of taking care of their daughter. Alice informs Mr. Waythorn that Haskett had sent a letter requesting to visit Lily in the Waythorn home as the story unfolds. Although he reluctantly agrees that Haskett ought to see her daughter as the law permits, he is firstly upset, cueing that “this is beastly” (Wharton 14). Regardless, Mr. Wythorn asks Alice to try to forget about it. Alice follows the order and changes the conversation exclaiming “how pretty everything is” (Wharton 14). Here, Wharton tries to depict that one of the roles of a woman in a marriage or relationship is to follow their husband’s orders. Assuming tables were turned, and it was Mr. Wythorn on the receiving end, the situation could not have been the same.

The theme of women in marriage and motherhood is further elaborated during Mr. Haskett’s final visit to the Waythorn house. Mr. Haskett informs Mr. Wayton of his displease with Lily’s French government and suggests its dismissal. However, Alice is upset over Mr. Haskett’s interference with Lily’s life and bursts into tears. To Mr. Wythorn, Haskett's suggestion is an illustration of how deeply he cares for Lily. Subsequently, he coldly reminds Alice that Mr. Hasket has a legal entitlement to decide on matters related to Lily, and per Haskett’s request, the governess is dropped. This indicates that irrespective of their views or demands, women in the then-American society had the role of following men’s commands.

Wharton also depicts women as having a societal role of being the custodians of marriage. As Lily’s health condition improves and she is considered “out of danger,” Waythorn lets lose his guard and arrives home at normal hours as he considers himself somehow “out of danger” (Wharton 15). This depicts that Mr. Waythorn is insecure that her wife Lilly may be taken back by her ex-husband. Considering that the decision whether to stay or not, if such a case is about to happen, lies on Alice’s hand, she is, therefore, the custodian of their marriage. This is further elaborated when Mr. Waythorn finally meets Haskett. After the meet-up, Waythorn is utterly shocked at Haskett’s reality. Waythorn expected Alice’s first husband to be a “ despicable brute” (Wharton 17). However, Waythorn’s first impression of Hackett is a polite, unassuming, and the decidedly common man. This shocks and disgusts Mr. Waythorn as he realizes the little intel he has on Mr. Haskett and his marriage life with Alice. To him, her wife’s gracefulness, tact, and composure are “ a studied negation of that period of her life” (Wharton 17). This makes Waythorn pity Hacken. To Mr. Waythorn, Haskett was deceived by Alice, just like she has deceived him. In other words, Waythorn blames Alice for the failure of their marriage with Mr. Haskett. In Waythorn’s society, A woman is the custodian of a marriage. Although women in both “A Journey’s” society and “The Two of Us” are the custodians of marriage, women in the latter have the freedom to seek divorce as the story covers a wealthy family. This depicts that during the Realism and Naturalism era, the social class, to some extent, determined the freedoms a woman enjoyed. Conway et al. (67) support this, citing that women from the upper class in the American society from the 1930s did not have as many restrictions as those from the middle and lower classes. “The Two of Us” is a perfect reflection of the Realism and Naturalism era.

**3.2 Women’s Role in Accommodating Others**

In “The Other Two,” Wharton also displays women as having a role of accommodating others in society. When Waythorn stops at a restaurant close to his office for lunch, he spots Mr. Varick, Alice’s second husband, seated a few feet away. Wharton points out that “fortunately,” they are not as “uncomfortably close” as they were on the train (Wharton 25). To avoid making further “polite, awkward small talk,” Waythorn pretends he has not seen Varick but watches him eat and wonders whether their encounter earlier had made any impression on Varick (Wharton 25). Here, Wharton depicts men as non-accommodating, setting a foundation for her to stress women's accommodative nature and role in society. When Waythorn finds Haskett in the library and Varick joins them shortly, Wharton describes these men as siting “awkwardly together.” To the extent that Vastick attempts to talk business with Mr. Wathorn to dissolve this “awkwardness” (Wharton 45). Wharton uses this incident to stress that men are somewhat not accommodating to support her claims that women have a role in accommodating others in society. To emphasize her claims, Wharton uses Alice. When Alice enters the room to have tea with her husband, she is unnoticeably perturbed at Haskett’s presence and reacts pleasurably to Varick, although she was not expecting him to be around. Subsequently, Alice’s “propriety” takes over, and “she assumes the role of accommodating, cheerful hostess” (Wharton 45). She offers the men cups of tea, and the story ends with the two guests and the Waythorns sitting together in the library. Alice successfully changes the “awkward sitting” to a more accommodative environment. The accommodative nature of the environment created by Alice is stressed by Mr. Waythorn accepting a third cup of tea with “a laugh.”

Similarly, Warthorn expounds on sacrificing individual happiness for your spouse as one of a woman’s roles in marriage. When Waython returns home for dinner on the first day Mr.Haskett visits to see his ailing daughter, Waythorn notices that Alice is childishly happy to narrate the “meaningless, banal details of the day” (Wharton 7). Here, Wharton’s choice of words reflects the perception of a woman’s happiness in a man’s eyes. Waytorn considered the things that made Alice happy “meaningless.” After dinner, Waythron inquires whether Haskett visited as expected, and Alice says he did, although she did not see him herself. To some extent, Warthorn uses this scene to depict that although Alice would be happy to see the father of her daughter take care or share a moment with his daughter, she could not protect her marriage or protect her husband from his insecurities. This is stressed by Mr. Waythron's reflection as Alice serves coffee. While Alice foregoes her happiness to please her partner, Mr. Waythorn boasts how good it feels to “possess” Alice (Wharton 8). Indeed, a women’s happiness in the Realism and Naturalism era was not considered important.

**3.3 Women’s Role in Giving Hope to Others**

Wharton also uses her work “The Two of US” to show that women during the Realism and Naturalism era gave hope to others just by their existence. To her, this is an inborn gift that nearly every woman has. This is depicted through Alice. Despite having a somewhat mysterious past and having undergone two divorces, Alice still lights the world for other people around her. Her exceptional grasp of etiquette makes her quite popular among the Waythorn’s social circle in New York. Although she is unaware, her social grace, especially next to Mr. Waythorn’s somewhat unstable sensibilities, blows his mind. This shows that irrespective of the burden of responsibilities the then American society put on women, they still stood strong and happy, not necessarily for themselves alone but also to shed light on others. However, most of the time, they were not aware of this. For instance, most women who achieved educational milestones during the Realism and Naturalism era could not have noticed the number of young women they gave hope to get an education.

**4.0 Conclusion**

Edith Wharton’s “A Journey” and “The Two of Us " reflect American society's societal and gender roles during the Realism and Naturalism. The Realism and Naturalism period lay between 1870 and lasted in 1910, and it is mainly characterized by a focus on everyday situations and ordinary characters. Both “A Journey” and “The Two of Us” show women being restricted to marriage and motherhood as subjects to men’s happiness and a source of hope to others. Overall, these stories perfectly cover the reality of American women in the late 1870s and early 1900s.

**Works Cited**

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