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Themes in *Madame De Treymes*

**A Paper Submitted to
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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

{وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ ۗ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا}

(الإسراء: ٨٥)

In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful

“And they ask you about the Spirit. Say, “The Spirit belongs to the domain of my Lord; and you were given only little knowledge.”

II

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Abstract

In this research paper you will find a biography of Edith Wharton and some points about her writing style. And also in this paper you will read a brief summary about the novella “*Madame De Treymes*”. Then I will talk about themes found in *Madame De Treymes* especially cultures’ differences between American and French cultures and also you will face the theme of divorce and how the French law and Catholic church deal with it and how they treat a divorced woman if she wants to remarry again.

Introduction

Edith Wharton, nee Edith Newbold Jones, was born in January 24, 1862 in Manhattan, New York. She is an American author best known for her stories and novels about the upper class society into which she was born. (“Edith Wharton | Biography, Books and Facts”)

She was born into an aristocratic family. The third child and only daughter of Lucretia Rhineland and George Frederic Jones, she had two older brothers, Frederic and Harry. They both descended from American revolutionary families and their surnames had been leading New York society for generations. (“Edith Wharton | Biography, Books and Facts”)

The Civil War diminished their dynastic wealth, so in 1866, the Jones family left for Europe to escape the economic ramifications of the war, and travelled between Germany, Rome, Paris, and Madrid. Despite a brief stint with typhoid in 1870, Edith enjoyed a luxurious and cultured childhood and spent most of her childhood in Europe, before returning to the United States in 1872. (“Edith Newbold Jones Wharton | Encyclopedia.com”)

Her parents expected from her to learn and uphold aristocratic norms and values. Therefore, her father made a decision to educate her privately at home with the help of the skilful tutors and she was also educated abroad. Her family set up certain aristocratic standards and her family was well known by those standards. Thus, her family, as many other aristocratic families in

America, was characterized with the wealth, power, social standing, connections and family bloodlines. (ibid)

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Edith Wharton was born during the Civil War and certain historical, socio-political and economic developments played significant role in her writings. There are several periods that left significant impact on her writings namely; the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, the WW I and the Great Depression. Immediately after the end of the Civil War, America began with the process of political, social and economic reconstruction and in the course this led to the territorial expansion and eventually imperialism. However, rapid economic and industrial growth, urbanization, mass migrations and technological inventions affected all aspects of life, including the scope of the literature, as is the case with Wharton's novels. Therefore, these socio-political and economic transformations had stimulated the emergence of a vast literature on race, slavery, discrimination, segregation, children, women and worker's rights. She had lived into a tightly controlled society at a time when women were discouraged from achieving anything beyond a proper marriage. ("Edith Wharton Biography – Life, Family, Childhood, Story, Death, Young, Book, Old, Information, Born, House")

Wharton broke through these strictures to become one of America's greatest writers. Author of *The Age of Innocence*, *Ethan Frome*, and *The House of Mirth*, she wrote over 40 books in 40 years, including authoritative works on architecture, gardens, interior design, and travel. ("Edith Wharton — the Mount | Edith Wharton's Home")

Marriage

In 1885 she married a wealthy banker from Boston Edward Robbins (Teddy) Wharton at age 23. Conserving her social status. Although she got a collection of her poems printed when she was sixteen years old, she began writing vigorously after her marriage in 1885. She said about her then husband: ‘He was thirteen years older than myself, but the difference in age was lessened by his natural youthfulness, his good humor and gaiety, and the fact that he shared my love of animals and out-door life, and was soon to catch my travel-fever’’. However, that love story didn’t last, because they imperfectly suited for each other. In 1910 the Whartons moved to France, Her married life was very unhappy. The reason was her husband’s Edward Wharton where suffered severe condition of acute depression which eventually led to mental disorder and was placed in a sanitorium, a hospital for the mentally unstable. After their divorce in 1913, Edith Wharton stayed in France, writing lovingly about it in *French Ways and Their Meanings* (1919) and other books. (“Edith Wharton — the Mount | Edith Wharton’s Home”)

Edith Wharton’s life was marked by unhappy relationships: her unrequited lifelong love for Walter Berry, a lawyer; her unhappy marriage to Edward Robbins ‘Teddy’ Wharton, who would later go mad; and her extramarital affair with an American journalist, Morton Fullerton. Her marriage to Teddy fell apart when it emerged that he had embezzled his wife’s money to fund a love nest for his

mistress. Writing novels, it seems, was Edith Wharton's way of coming to terms with the disappointments of her life. ("Edith Wharton (1862-1937)")

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Death

Wharton started enduring strokes in 1935 and entered formal therapeutic care taking after a heart assault in June 1937. She passed on at her home on August 11, 1937, Saint-Brice-sous-Forêt, near Paris, France), age 75 at Pavillon Colombe. She is buried, within the Cimetière des Gonards in Versailles, near to her great friend Walter Berry. ("Edith Wharton — the Mount | Edith Wharton's Home")

Writing Style

Edith Wharton was one of the most prominent writers, whose works were extensively tackling the effect of a social class on behavior and mind, especially that of the upper class elite. In the process of expressing and articulating American progressive ideals, Wharton was also addressing European customs, morality and sensibility. (What Is Edith Wharton's Writing Style? – Cement Answers)

Wharton had lived in a tightly controlled society at a time when women were discouraged from achieving anything beyond a proper marriage. She broke through these strictures to become one of America's greatest writers. Author of *The Age of Innocence*, *Ethan Frome*, and *The House of Mirth*, she wrote over 40 books in 40 years, including authoritative works on

architecture, gardens, interior design, and travel. (“Edith Wharton — the Mount | Edith Wharton’s Home”)

While living in Newport, Wharton honed her design skills, co-authoring (with Ogden Codman, Jr.) her first major book, a surprisingly successful non-fiction work on design and architecture, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). (ibid)

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European impact and experiences were reflected in all her novels, especially in the form of using material details in the literature. For instance, her first book, *The Decoration of Houses* (1898), was based on a study of French architectural design. Direct personal experience and socio- historical developments played significant role in Wharton’s writings. (“Edith Wharton | Biography, Books and Facts”)

Edith Wharton’s writing style included the use of subtle dramatic irony. Her writing style is called social realism, a style of the later part of the nineteenth century. It prevailed mostly as a reaction to the romanticism that had taken up most of the century in its grip. Edith Wharton was also a talented designer. (What Is Edith Wharton’s Writing Style? – Cement Answers)

Edith Wharton as a Modern Writer

Critical dissonance over Edith Wharton’s modernist practices has intensified over the last decade, and although few view her nowadays as the “literary aristocrat” Parrington had firmly ensconced in the nineteenth century, Wharton’s relationship with modernism and modernist writing

continues to be an increasingly. (What Is Edith Wharton's Writing Style? – Cement Answers)

Material details in Edith Wharton's writings Almasa Mulalić" abstract Edith Wharton was among the most prominent writers of her time and could compete with any of her contemporary colleagues. (ibid)

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However, Edith Wharton as a female writer rose above her colleagues in her style and attitudes towards novel writing. The central themes in her novels were the conflict between social and individual fulfillment, repressed sexuality, and the manners of old families and the new elite, who had made their fortunes in more recent years. (“Edith Wharton — the Mount | Edith Wharton's Home”)

Besides, her literary characters were often presented as tragic victims of cruel social convictions. She, in a way, criticized double standards in the upper class society at that time. Through her novels she tried to present the society as it really is, and didn't try to idealize behaviors and attitudes of the proponents in her writings. There is one characteristic in her writing that attracts our attention as readers, the small details that she is particularly paying attention throughout her writing. (“Edith Wharton — the Mount | Edith Wharton's Home”)

You might be familiar with two of Wharton's most famous novels, *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), both of which show

her writing style. Her style corresponds to the Realist movement in literature, which aimed to portray everyday life events and is known for describing places and people without extravagance but in deep detail. Influenced by her privileged upbringing, Wharton's work often focused on the upper class – observing their lives and social values. For example, in *The House of Mirth* she wrote: ‘‘We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed until we drop’’. ([CSL STYLE ERROR: reference with no printed form.])

Edith Wharton used a simple style without overusing literary devices like metaphors. In this concrete style, she managed to delve into controversial topics of that time such as divorce and the sexual freedom of women. This is seen in her famous novel *The Age of Innocence*: ‘‘There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free’’. ([CSL STYLE ERROR: reference with no printed form.])

Chapter One

Section One: Summary of *Madame De Treymes*

Madame de Treymes, Edith Wharton's novella, first publication after the highly successful *The House of Mirth*, is a captivating portrait of turn-of-the-century American and French culture. Inspired by Wharton's own entrée into Parisian society in 1906 and reminiscent of the works of Henry James, it tells the story of two young innocents. (“[PDF] *Madame de Treymes* by Edith Wharton Illustrated Free Download Ful”)

The best of Wharton's early novellas is her polished *Madame de Treymes*, a deliberate imitation of Henry James, with whom she took a motor trip in France the year the novella appeared. (“[PDF] *Madame de Treymes* by Edith Wharton Illustrated Free Download Ful”)

The tale features American expatriates living in France, and contrasts new world simplicity and individual freedoms with old world family traditions and manipulation. The situation also has a slightly Gothic tinge: an unhappy young woman, trapped in a loveless marriage to a corrupt husband, with very little chance of escape, is hounded by ruthlessly devious relatives. (“*Madame de Treymes* – Tutorial, Study Guide & Commentary”)

The central conundrum with which one is left at the end of the tale is Madame de Treymes’ possible motive for deceiving Durham? She understands and explains the family’s traditional and tightly controlled attitudes fuelled by religious belief towards divorce. This would be entirely in

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keeping with social conventions at the time, when the Catholic church frowned upon divorce with a force which was a de facto prohibition. (“*Madame de Treymes* – Tutorial, Study Guide & Commentary”)

But this apparently religious objection to divorce has a much more material basis in French society, which was governed by the Napoleonic Code that kept inherited wealth and property concentrated into family units rather than freely distributed amongst individuals. This explains the reason why the Malrive family wish to trade Fanny’s son in return for the divorce. She can exercise her rights to a divorce under civil law, but they keep the son, theoretically united with his father, and thereby prevent any wealth passing out of the family. (“*Madame de Treymes* – Tutorial, Study Guide & Commentary”)

John Durham, an elegant New York gentleman, returns to Paris with the intention of marrying his childhood friend, Fanny Frisbee, recently

separated from the lustful Marquess of Malrive. Despite the love they both profess, Madame de Malrive decides to renounce the promising marriage, fearing that the puritanical family of her husband will oppose her divorce and that a possible scandal will damage the good name of her son. Durham decides to resort to the sister-in-law of his lover, Madame de Treymes, who until now had been favorable to the union. But the scales of values of the enigmatic Parisian lady and the innocent American are so different that, despite the good intentions of both, will trigger a tragic and unexpected end. (Wharton, Edith: *Madame De Treymes* – Abebooks)

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This novella exhibits Wharton's subtle realism and is one of her works depicting Americans living in France. It tells of Fanny de Malrive, née Frisbee, a once free-spirited New Yorker now married to a French marquis. Like several of Wharton's female protagonists, she is trapped within an unhappy marriage as well as being constricted by the "sacred institutions" of the Parisian Faubourg St. Germain aristocracy. ("*Madame de Treymes* (1907)")

Estranged from her dissolute husband, Fanny Frisbee has fallen in love with John Durham, a friend from her New York youth. She hopes to marry Durham and return to America, but she fears that her Catholic husband will refuse a divorce and that he may claim custody of their son, the heir to the family title. Durham meets the marquis' sister Madame de Treymes, a mysterious, keenly intelligent woman who is herself guilty of adultery, and he seeks her help in getting the family to consent to a divorce. She, in subtle

language, offers the possibility of persuading the family if, in return, he will help pay the gambling debts that her lover, the Prince d'Armillac, has incurred. He is offended by this proposition and refuses it, but soon after he learns from Fanny that the de Malrive family, reportedly at Madame de Treymes' urging, has decided to accept and proceed with the divorce. Durham is perplexed, and when he sees Madame de Treymes again, he shamefacedly offers to help her in whatever way he can. She responds mysteriously that she has already "repaid" herself for this service. (ibid)

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In Durham's final encounter with Madame de Treymes weeks later, when Fanny's divorce is almost complete, she tells him that she now understands why he refused to help her, as this means would have been a "desecration" of his and Fanny's future happiness. However, she adds that the "repayment" she previously alluded to was that "I knew there was horrible misery in store for you, and that I was waiting to feast my eyes on it." She explains that the de Malrives agreed to the divorce because, under French law, when Fanny remarries, they may claim custody of Fanny's son—and raise him according to their values: "We abhor divorce—we go against our religion in consenting to it—and nothing short of recovering the boy could possibly justify us." Knowing that Fanny will never give up her son, Durham, sadder and wiser, renounces his hopes of marrying Fanny. (*Madame de Treymes* (1907))

Section Two: Cultures' Differences in *Madame De Treymes*

Edith Wharton considers America a fledgling nation with no deep understanding of history and traditions. She felt that novelty and innovation have defined America, in contrast to the history and continuity with which she is associated with Europe. She was fascinated by the contrast between American and European sensibilities, a subject she addressed in works such as *Madame de Treymes* (1907), and believed that Americans could have a vision. Further by developing awareness and understanding of European culture. (Pennell, Melissa McFarland . Student Companion to Edith Wharton. 2003)

Wharton's main theme is a comparison of the values of American and European families, Durham is an individualist who refuses to follow accepted

norms, and aristocratic families have a deep history of marriage and church. It is constrained by bias. In such a thematic choice, Wharton weaves a loose, inevitably short plot around the quest for these differences. (Wharton. 1995)

In *Madame de Treymes*, Paris is presented as a city of orderly beauty especially when John Durham admits that it may be “the most beautiful city in the world,” especially when compared to the “unenlightened ugliness” of New York. This place seems to embody the European experience, as a tribute to history and culture. When John Durham goes to the Hotel de Malrive, he sees the family pictures, the “great gilt consoles” and the “monumental gateway” (*Madame De Treymes*, v, 22) as signs of the family’s past and in connections to the history of France. John Durham became acquainted with Paris through the eyes of Fanny de Malrive. (*ibid*)

And John Durham soon established a kind of symbiotic relationship between the city of Paris and Fanny; he perceives Paris and its society purely through Fanny’s reaction and the prospect of their future union. Durham’s growing attraction to her stems from his European experience. He considers Fanny a mature and accomplished person who has acquired the complexity and sophistication that characterizes French society. As a result, Fanny exhibits qualities she feels she lacks while living in her homeland, and these make her more attractive from Durham’s perspective of Americans. (Herlihy-Mera and Koneru, “Paris in American Literatures: On Distance as a Literary Resource”)

The mysterious aura of French society is validated by the complex communication system they employ but also by the effective metaphor of light and shadow in relation to American and French citizens. In this regard, as Durham approached the Hotel de Malrive, located across the Seine, his attention was first fixed on “shutters closed to the silence of the high-walled court” (Wharton 1995:71), thus, associate the hotel with an ancient order of things, old nationalist prejudices, and a bygone era of feudalism. In contrast, when Fanny de Malrive visited Jambons de Dur, she once again felt safe among her countrymen, claiming that Durham’s mother transported her back to “that clear American air where there are no obscurities, no mysteries” (*Madame De Treymes*, 11, 11). On the one hand, this effective and repeated use of this metaphor emphasizes how complex and invulnerable Parisian society can become for foreigners, and on the other hand, the emotions Nostalgia is awakened when Americans living far from their homeland come together. (Herlihy-Mera and Koneru, “Paris in American Literatures: On Distance as a Literary Resource”)

Fanny de Malrive often introduced Durham to French society, especially when he revealed his intention to marry her after her divorce. Although Fanny seems to be a part of French society, especially since she is suspicious of “being once more American among Americans” (*Madame De Treymes*, 11, 12) when Durham proposes to her She is also aware that she has undergone a significant change, admitting that she is no longer Fanny Frisbee. During her time living in Paris, she was shaped by her experiences, becoming French in some way. (Herlihy-Mera and Koneru, “Paris in American Literatures: On Distance as a Literary Resource”)

During her encounters with John Durham, Fanny de Malrive admitted that she was now part of this new circle, realizing that she belonged to them. She is thus well aware of the mysterious cohesion of this new social group, she advises Durham to value silence in the society of Faubourg, she is encouraging him to look for the truth in what they don't say as stated "It's the long habit, you know, of not believing them — of looking for the truth always in what they don't say" (*Madame De Treymes*, vii, 35), and she soon draws Durham's attention to it, knowing it will inevitably baffle him as an American:

That is what I meant when I said you could never understand! There is nothing in your experience- in any American experience-to correspond with that far-reaching family organization, which is itself a part of the larger system, and which encloses a young man of my son's position in a network of accepted prejudices and opinions. Everything is prepared in advance-his political and religious convictions, his judgements of people, his sense of honour, his ideas of women, his whole view of life. (*Madame De Treymes*, ii, 9)

As a result, Durham realized that Fanny Frisbee had undergone a definite transformation, which could be seen as a kind of cultural transformation. (ibid)

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Fanny Frisbee even seems to have acquired a different personality with the name of Fanny de Malrive; she became a product of foreign society after her marriage. (Herlihy-Mera and Koneru, "Paris in American Literatures: On Distance as a Literary Resource")

(ibid), In addition to Fanny de Malrive, John Durham additionally holds common interviews together along with his cousins, the Boykins, a married American couple who've lived in Paris for twenty-5 years. The Boykins are

defined as exiled Americans who truly country their reluctance to thrust themselves into French society. Even in the event that they have lived in Paris for a prolonged duration of time, they preserve directly to their Americanism, giving form to a type of American colony in Paris (ibid):

In the isolation of their exile they had created about them a kind of phantom America, where the national prejudices continued to flourish unchecked by the national progressiveness: a little world sparsely peopled by compatriots in the same attitude of chronic opposition toward a society chronically unaware of them. (*Madame De Treymes*, IV, 18)

John Durham is a straightforward gentleman with many traditions of George Washington. He met Madame De Treymes because she is the only person who can help him to get his love. She told him that she feels of Madame De Malrive's status because she has also unhappy marriage and has an affair with another man outside marriage. She offered him her help by convincing her family to approve the divorce of Madame De Malrive if he writes her a check to pay the debts of her lover but he refused. He refuses any deal against his upright nature. (Tuttleton et al., "Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews")

When John Durham met Madame De Treymes again, she told him that she interested in Fanny's happiness and the Divorce proceedings continue. But at the third meeting she stated that the family is no longer interested in the woman they want the child who is the family heir. So he has been deceived successfully even as he has reckoned her malign dishonesty. He will stop the proceedings immediately. Then she is touched by his bravery, and she said

“Ah, you poor, good man” (*Madame De Treymes*, x, 54). (Tuttleton et al., “Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews”)

Section Three: Divorce in *Madame De Treymes*

Edith Wharton, in her novel *Madame De Treymes*, addressed French law and Catholic church, especially when that novel focused on manipulating a child in relation to divorce and a divorced and remarried woman immediately becomes unfit to be a mother. (Wharton, “The Custom of the Country”)

In *Madame De Treymes*, an important topic has been raised which is the divorce and how the Malrive family dealt with the collapse of the Marquis marriage when the reaction of the family was as following “we simply transferred our allegiance to the child — we constituted him the family.”(*Madame De Treymes*, x, 50). (Beer, “Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction”)

Madame De Malrive was thinking about her son. Not being Catholic herself, Durham, her suitor, said that when her son grew up she could leave him, as she would be unimportant to him. But she said that she will always want the boy (Tintner).

‘Just leave that to me — only tell me exactly what you’re afraid of.’

She paused again, and then said: ‘The divorce, to begin with — they will never consent to it.’

He noticed that she spoke as though the interests of the whole clan, rather than her husband’s individual claim, were to be considered; and the use of the plural pronoun shocked his free individualism like a glimpse of some dark feudal survival.

‘But you are absolutely certain of your divorce! I’ve consulted — of course without mentioning names — ‘

She interrupted him, with a melancholy smile: ‘Ah, so have I. The divorce would be easy enough to get, if they ever let it come into the courts.’ (*Madame De Treymes*, 11, 11)

In the story of *Madame de Treymes* there is no room for personal use nor for interpretation, the law and the church represent two realms incapable of translation or even understanding. As John Durham says to *Madame de Treymes* “Your French justice takes a grammar and dictionary to understand.” (*Madame De Treymes*, x, 49). (Beer, “Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction”)

In the last meeting of Durham with Madame De Treymes, chapter Nine ends with her question, “Have you never asked yourself,” she enquired, “why our family consented so readily to a divorce?” (*Madame De Treymes*, ix, 47) A question answered in chapter ten. Christine admits she concealed the fact that on “the remarriage of the mother, the courts instantly restored the child to the father,” (*Madame De Treymes*, x, 49). She knew that if Fanny divorced her, she would surely lose her child. The whole situation changes when it comes to another marriage. When this happens, the child will automatically return to his father, no matter how brutal it may be, but that is the law. (Tintner)

Although there are differences in the circumstances, the situation links both Bourget’s novel and Edith Wharton’s short story. As a result, non-Catholics involved in two divorces had to file with the authorities of the Catholic Church. The divorce of non-Catholic Albert Darras was broken by the Catholic Church. As soon as his wife resumed her religious faith, he no longer had the right to claim any form of freedom in marriage just like what happened with Fanny de Malrive in *Madame De Treymes* by Edith Wharton. Bourget believes that such a civil marriage should never take place because divorce is a prison and therefore should not exist, especially when an original Catholic ceremony is signed. In Wharton’s novel, if John Durham marries American Fanny, he will forever deprive her of her son, and what he won’t do, as a man of honor. (ibid)

Criticizing the disastrous impact of the French Catholic Church and the Americans of goodwill in his novels, both of which were ensnared by the French Catholic Church. (ibid)

Conclusion

First published in 1907, *Madame de Treymes* is a short story about an American’s attempt, John Durham, to win the hand of his ex-girlfriend Fanny Frisbee, who became Madame de Malrive by marriage. Durham tried to use the character of the same name, a cousin of Fanny, to institute a divorce for

Fanny, whose marriage was clearly unhappy. Unfortunately, the noble family works to set a trap that Fanny must fall into. (Wharton, “*Madame de Treymes* (1907) Novel by Edith Wharton”)

Madame de Treymes herself embodies all that is inexplicable in the organization of French upper society, especially for women. From the very beginning of the story, Wharton contrasts the ways of communication between the nations of France and America, setting them apart, not only in language but also in intent, meaning and connotation, at the heart of the whole secret. Hide and conflict; Madame de Treymes is the one who, for tragic purposes, best exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of the “common authority principle” to which all follow. (Beer, “Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction”)

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