The Other Two

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDITH WHARTON

Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones in 1862. Wharton's paternal relatives, the Joneses, were a wealthy and socially significant New York family who made their fortune in real estate. Wharton lived a privileged life of private tutors and tours abroad to Europe. In 1879, she made her formal debut into upper-class society, performing as debutante. Wharton's wealthy upbringing would inform much of her writing. Although her gender prevented her from receiving much encouragement, she began writing a novella, *Fast and Loose*, in 1877. *Verses*, a collection of poems, was published privately in 1878. In 1885, Wharton married Edward "Teddy" Wharton in New York. The couple loved to travel and did so extensively—most often to Italy—throughout their marriage. While in the States, they lived primarily at "The Mount," their estate in Lenox, Massachusetts, which Wharton—a lover of architecture and decoration—designed in 1902. Though she is best known for her novels, Wharton would write over 80 short stories in her lifetime. "The Other Two" was first published in 1904. The novel *The House of Mirth*, one of her best-known works, was published the following year. In 1921, Wharton was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Age of Innocence* (1920). She died of a stroke while in France in 1937.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Other Two" was published in 1904, near the end of the era known as The Gilded Age. The Gilded Age, which occurred in the later part of the 19th Century, refers to the period of rapid economic growth that occurred in the United States following the Civil War. During the Gilded Age, the United States witnessed massive industrialization, wage increases, and exorbitant increases to personal wealth. However, such good fortune was not extended to all, and in addition to all those who flourished, there were significant numbers of impoverished peoples—such as immigrants, women, and people of color—for whom the Gilded Age failed to shine. A "gilded" object (or historical period) is not golden all the way through; rather, it is only wrapped in a thin outer layer of luster. Beneath the gilded realm of America's newly expanded upper-crust lay a hidden world of poverty and subjection. One social consequence of the Gilded Age, thus, was a growing critique of this economic disparity. Edith Wharton's "The Other Two" plays on the problem of being gilded—of hiding a more disagreeable, problematic core beneath a false, outer layer of gold.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Wharton's fiction fits into the larger category of Realism, a literary moment that emphasized representation of the unembellished, actual world. Some particularly well-known works that fall into this category are John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Henry James's *Daisy Miller* (1879). It is also situated within the broad category of Gilded Age literature, which largely delved into critiques of class hierarchy, economic inequality, and government corruption. Writers such as Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner were contemporaries of Wharton who drew on similarly sharp social critiques in their works. On a more specific level, "The Other Two" draws on themes and concepts prevalent throughout Wharton's larger body of work. In particular, this story illustrates the light wit and keen critique that Wharton directs at the upper-class lifestyle with which she was so intimately acquainted. Maureen Howard notes that another recurring theme in Wharton's early stories is a climactic revealing of the truth. Howard cites the central conflict of Wharton's "The Lamp of Psyche," in which a woman learns that the husband she has viewed as a cultured heroic figure is actually a coward. "The Other Two" presents a similar "revealing" motion, as Mr. Waythorn learns his wife isn't as innocent as he'd been led to believe.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Other Two"
- **When Written:** 1904
- **When Published:** 1904
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** New York City, New York
- **Climax:** Waythorn discovers the hidden motives of social advancement and self-improvement behind his wife's habit of remarriage.
- **Antagonist:** Mr. Varick, Mr. Haskett, Mrs. Waythorn
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Diversified Portfolio. Not limited to fiction, Wharton wrote an interior design manual, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), with the American architect Ogden Codman.

Girl Power. Wharton was the first woman to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Literature, which she received for *The Age of Innocence* in 1921.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Other Two" follows the conflict that arises between wealthy newlyweds Mr. Waythorn and Mrs. Alice Waythorn as unanticipated events force Alice's two ex-husbands into the couple's public and private lives. Despite boasting a somewhat mysterious past and having two divorces under her belt, Alice is accepted by—and even quite popular among—the Waythorns' New York social circle, due in large part to her exceptional grasp of etiquette. Mr. Waythorn reveals that he is also smitten with Alice's social grace, especially next to his "somewhat unstable sensibilities." The story begins as Mr. and Mrs. Waythorn arrive **home** to New York from their honeymoon, the trip cut unexpectedly short by the sudden illness of Lily Haskett, Alice's daughter from her first marriage.

Mr. Waythorn waits at the dinner table for Alice, who had been upstairs checking on Lily. Alice finally arrives, accompanied by a look of grave concern. She informs Waythorn that she has received a letter from Mr. Haskett, her first husband, stating that he wishes to visit Lily in the Waythorn home while Lily is sick with typhoid. Mr. Waythorn is upset, but he reluctantly agrees that Haskett must see his daughter, if for no other reason than that the law permits him to do so. "It's beastly," Mr. Waythorn says to Alice, "but try to forget about it." Alice follows her husband's order and shifts the conversation to a cheerier subject, exclaiming, "How pretty everything is!"

Waythorn leaves for work earlier than usual the next day in order to avoid running into Mr. Haskett. He plans to remain out of the house for the evening. Waythorn runs into Mr. Gus Varick, Alice's second husband, on the "elevated" train on his way to the office. Varick informs Mr. Waythorn that Mr. Sellers, the senior partner at Waythorn's firm, has fallen ill. The illness has occurred at an especially inopportune time, explains Varick, as Sellers and just taken him on as a client. The train arrives at Varick's stop, and the men part ways.

At work, Sellers's illness is confirmed. Because of the illness, Mr. Sellers's work will go to Mr. Waythorn. Later that day, Waythorn stops at a restaurant close to his office for lunch. He once again spots Mr. Varick, "seated a few feet off." Fortunately, they are not as uncomfortably close as they were on the train, and Mr. Waythorn pretends he hasn't seen Varick in order to avoid making further polite, awkward small-talk. Waythorn watches Varick eat decadently and wonders whether their morning encounter made any impression on the seemingly confident, unflappable Varick.

Having successfully avoided Mr. Haskett, Waythorn returns home for dinner. He and Alice exchange mundane details about one another's day, and Mr. Waythorn smugly observes how childishly happy Alice is to tell him the meaningless, banal details of her day. Waythorn does not tell Alice about his conversation with Varick. After dinner, the couple retires to the library for coffee and liqueurs. Waythorn inquires whether Haskett visited, and Alice says that he did, though she did not see him herself. While Alice serves coffee, Mr. Waythorn reflects on how good it feels to possess Alice.

Ten days later, Sellers is still sick, and Waythorn is forced to take on his clients—including Varick. Waythorn is afraid of what his social circle will think of his business relationship with Varick.

Lily continues to improve, and Waythorn begins to tolerate Haskett's visits. On Haskett's visiting day the following week, Lily's fever breaks, and she is considered "out of danger." Feeling that somehow he, too, is "out of danger," Waythorn lets his guard down and arrives home at a normal hour. He heads to the library and runs into Haskett, whom he describes as "a small, effaced-looking man." Waythorn is completely shocked at the reality of Haskett: he had expected Alice's first husband to be a despicable brute, but the man before him is polite, unassuming, and decidedly common.

Waythorn feels violated by this unassuming stranger's presence in his house. More importantly, he feels shock and disgust at how little he knows about Mr. Haskett and the life Alice lived with him when they were married. Waythorn realizes that despite all her gracefulness and tact, his wife has deceived him, and he observes that her composure is nothing more than "a studied negation of that period of her life" when she was married to Haskett. Waythorn pities Haskett since he, too, was deceived by Alice.

A week later, on Mr. Haskett's final visit to the Waythorn house, he informs Mr. Waythorn that he is unhappy with Lily's French governess and would like to see her dismissed. Waythorn sees how deeply Haskett cares for Lily and again feels ashamed for judging him, and foolish for sanctifying Alice. Alice is upset that Mr. Haskett is interfering in Lily's life, and bursts into tears. Waythorn coldly reminds Alice that Haskett is legally entitled to have a say in Lily's affairs. Per Haskett's request, the governess is let go.

The winter draws on, and Varick and Waythorn's business relationship crosses expands into the social sphere. The social circle is thrilled that the Waythorns have chosen to be selfless and spare hostesses the uncomfortable task of having to choose between the Waythorns and Mr. Varick. Waythorn has only socially accepted Varick and Haskett, however, and remains plagued by anxiety and jealousy. He'd thought Alice could "shed her past like a man," when he married her, but has since changed his mind, realizing that Alice's past lives on in her mannerisms and tastes.

One afternoon, Haskett returns to the Waythorn house to see Lily. Waythorn finds Haskett in the library and offers him a cigar. Shortly after, Varick appears in the doorway, followed by the footman, carrying a **tea-table**. The three men sit awkwardly together. Varick attempts to talk business with Mr. Waythorn

when Alice enters the room to have tea with her husband. She sees the two unexpected guests, reacting pleasurably to Varick. She is *almost* unnoticeably perturbed at Haskett's presence. Her famous propriety takes over, and she assumes the role of accommodating, cheerful hostess. She offers the men cups of tea, and the story ends with the Waythorns and their two guests sitting together in the library. Waythorn accepts a third cup of tea "with a laugh."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Waythorn – A wealthy, socially prominent businessman, slightly older than 35 years of age. At the beginning of "The Other Two," Mr. Waythorn and his new wife, Alice Waythorn, have just returned to New York from their honeymoon. Mr. Waythorn takes pleasure "owning" his new wife, and he is immensely troubled when the sudden appearances of Alice's two ex-husbands, Mr. Varick and Mr. Haskett, threaten to dismantle this sense of ownership and control. Waythorn describes himself as having "somewhat unstable sensibilities," and this instability is a constant source of anguish and insecurity for him. He strives to be the most collected and poised person in all social situations. Alice thus embodies all that Mr. Waythorn would like to be, as she is unfalteringly calm, composed, and polite. Waythorn's "somewhat unstable sensibilities," complicate his desire to appear social poised, however, as they result in outbursts of jealousy and controlling behaviors when he feels threatened by the presence of Alice's ex-husbands. When confronted with the realization that he may never be able to fully know or control is wife—that his wife's social poise comes at the price of opacity and uncertainty, and that his own social poise comes at the cost of inner discomfort—Waythorn must chooses to stifle his true emotions and desire for complete ownership and control in order to maintain his appearance of propriety.

Mrs. Alice Waythorn – Mr. Waythorn's new wife. Alice has "confessed" to being 35 years old, and has been married twice before—first, to Mr. Haskett, and later to Mr. Varick. Alice has a young daughter, Lily, whose father is Mr. Haskett. Alice appears to be fond of her new husband, but she never behaves honestly or candidly in his company, assuming a perpetual air of social grace and propriety. Mr. Waythorn is initially quite attracted to Alice's unremitting sense of composure, though he grows to despise it when her unreadability leads to feelings of deception and jealousy. Because Alice avoids discussing unpleasant or awkward subjects, Mr. Waythorn knows very little about her previous husbands or what problems motivated her to seek two divorces, and assumes that the men were brutes, philanderers, or both. As the story unravels, the reader discovers that Alice's marital history is not tragic, but highly calculated and opportunistic: she repeatedly marries "up" in an effort to improve her economic condition and social standing. She divorced her first husband, Haskett, not for his brutishness, but for his lack of funds. Further, one comes to understand Alice's collected demeanor not as natural, but as a carefully considered set of behaviors that will allow her to flourish in this new life of wealth and social prominence she has obtained through marriage.

Mr. Gus Varick – Alice's second husband. He is considered a gentleman and is a very popular member of the Waythorns' high-class social circle. Varick's marriage to Alice was "brief and stormy," and it is implied that Varick is a womanizer. Varick is a client of Mr. Sellers, a senior partner at Mr. Waythorns' workplace, and enters into the Waythorns' lives when Sellers falls ill and Waythorn is forced to negotiate a business deal for him. Alice takes pleasure in talking to Varick. Mr. Waythorn accepts Varick out of professional and propriety obligation, but remains inwardly resentful and guarded in their social interactions.

Mr. Haskett – Alice's first husband. He is a common man of meager means, but he will do anything for his daughter, Lily, having recently moved across the state to be nearer to her. He is described as a "small effaced-looking man with a thinnish grey beard." Alice was dissatisfied with the limited life her marriage to Mr. Haskett offered her, so she divorced him to improve her social standing. Haskett is unimposing and polite, though his manners seem clunky and pedestrian, or "over-the-counter," in Mr. Waythorn's words. He wears a "made up" **tie**, which Waythorn sees symbolic of his plight and personality. Mr. Waythorn is sympathetic of Mr. Haskett, however, once her sees the opportunistic motivations behind Alice's multiple marriages.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lily Haskett – Mrs. Waythorn and Mr. Haskett's daughter. Lily lives with her mother and Mr. Waythorn, but is adored by her biological father. She is gravely ill with typhoid at the beginning of "The Other Two," prompting Mr. Haskett to come visit her, but improves steadily as the story progresses.

Mr. Sellers – Mr. Sellers is the senior partner at Mr. Waythorn's office. He falls ill with gout at the beginning of the story, and thus must pass along his client, Gus Varick, to Mr. Waythorn.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE AND ILLUSIONS

"The Other Two" follows Mr. Waythorn as he comes to terms with the fact that his wife's two ex-husbands, Mr. Haskett and Mr. Varick, are not far-off memories from another time and place but are real people who still play a role in the Waythorns' lives. Although this is already tricky territory to navigate, Mr. Waythorn's plight is complicated by the social norms and rigid standards of etiquette that govern his society. Even while feeling uncomfortable, disdainful, or embarrassed, Mr. Waythorn must behave politely, agreeably, and appropriately at all times. In "The Other Two," Edith Wharton—a member of the pristine upper class herself—reflects on the social etiquette with which she was so familiar. Charting the way that the story's protagonists, Mr. and Mrs. Waythorn, continually choose to place etiquette over honesty, Wharton provides a sharp social criticism, suggesting that etiquette is just an illusion that conceals the truth and ultimately undermines relationships. As both characters repeatedly show as the story unfolds, it's impossible to be both polite and honest.

Throughout the story, Wharton reinforces Mrs. Alice Waythorn's social pliancy and astute sense of etiquette, even in especially awkward or troubling circumstances. In response to Alice's daughter Lily's serious illness, Mr. Waythorn states, "no woman ever wasted less tissue in unproductive worry." Even in the exceptionally troubling circumstance of a sick child, Alice maintains her composure. Wharton situates this extreme situation next to Alice's hugely downplayed reaction in order to urge the reader to question the sincerity and motivation behind such an understated response to her daughter's health. A gravely ill child, suggests Wharton, ought to warrant *some* expression of worry—it speaks to Alice's misplaced priorities that she places etiquette above expressing fear over her possibly dying child. As the story goes on, it becomes clear that Alice harbors a private disdain for her first husband, Mr. Haskett. However, on coming across Mr. Haskett in her **home**—he is legally allowed to visit, as he is Lily's father—Alice astutely masks her displeasure. Mr. Waythorn observes: "Her smile faded for a moment, but she recalled it quickly, with a scarcely perceptible glance at Waythorn." Even though Haskett's presence takes her by surprise, Alice's sense of etiquette allows her to become immediately composed, quickly stamping out whatever emotions Haskett's presence brought up for her. Because of her composure in this moment and others, Mr. Waythorn is never able to fully grasp what his wife's relationship with Haskett was like, why she divorced him, or why his presence affects her the way that it does. When she unexpectedly encounters her husband and two ex-husbands together in the library, she proclaims enthusiastically, "I'm so sorry—I'm always late; but the afternoon was so lovely." Once again, Alice bends to propriety, dispelling an uncomfortable situation with light and cheerful—but clearly forced—language, masking whatever emotions she truly feels.

Similarly, although Waythorn feels deeply uncomfortable and insecure about the significant roles Mr. Haskett and Mr. Varick still play in his and Alice's life, he refuses to express or act on these feelings for fear of appearing uncivil. When unforeseen circumstances force Mr. Waythorn to take on Alice's second husband, Varick, as a client, Waythorn—to his dismay—is forced to develop a polite and friendly business relationship with the man. At Alice's insistence, the Waythorns extend this relationship beyond the realm of business and into their larger social life. The Waythorns' social circle is overjoyed at their "acceptance" of Varick, but in reality Mr. Waythorn is only appearing to "accept" Waythorn, lest he commit a social faux pas. Such an acceptance signifies that the Waythorns have decided to overlook their own feelings of hesitation and discomfort in order to be perceived as polite and socially accommodating. In reality, Waythorn practices "acceptance" as a polite coping mechanism, having "formed a protecting surface for his sensibilities." Waythorn acts at ease around the ex-husbands, but only to appease his wife and their social circle. In another instance, Waythorn encounters Alice speaking to Varick in one of the "remoter rooms" of a house at which they are attending a ball. Embarrassed, Alice suggests that it would be "'less awkward'" to be on speaking terms with her ex-husband. Though the thought of this makes Waythorn ill, he agrees, "wearily," with his wife's decision. The actions that Waythorn takes out of politeness—maintaining a social relationship with Varick—contradict his inner feelings of unease. He would rather avoid an awkward situation than confess his insecurities to his wife, suggesting that, for the upper class, conforming to social norms is often more important than expressing one's true feelings.

Despite this mutual dedication to maintaining appearances, Alice's extreme pliancy ultimately enrages Mr. Waythorn. Tensions build and remain unresolved when the couple consistently sacrifices honesty for politeness. Waythorn believes that he "could have forgiven her for blunders […] for resisting Haskett, for yielding to Varick." He could forgive anything, he believes, "but her acquiescence and her tact." Alice chooses to be polite and accommodating of her ex-husbands, making it impossible for Mr. Waythorn to ascertain how she actually feels about the two men. Though once entranced by Alice's social grace, Mr. Waythorn becomes frustrated at his wife's evasiveness, as he realizes that Alice's adherence to etiquette comes at the cost of building and maintaining intimacy and trust within their marriage.

The Waythorns' fixation on social etiquette and the resultant tensions that build in their relationship reveal Wharton's critical perception of social etiquette. Although the short story ends on a cheerful note, with the Waythorns and their two guests—Alice's two ex-husbands—sitting around a **tea-table**, drinking, and laughing, Wharton's critical treatment of social

etiquette throughout the text suggests that this happy scene is only an *illusion* of happiness and resolve. Mr. Waythorn laughs as he accepts another cup of tea, not because he is at ease, but because to appear otherwise would be an unspeakable social transgression. This ending, then, suggests that the Waythorns will carry on prioritizing their social status over honestly expressing themselves to acquaintances, friends, or even each other. In wholeheartedly committing themselves to maintaining an illusion of social poise, the Waythorns undermine their own relationship.

MARRIAGE AND GENDER INEQUALITY

"The Other Two" features a middle-aged couple, Mr. Waythorn and Mrs. Alice Waythorn, recently returned from their unexpectedly short honeymoon. Though at first the Waythorns appear to be a happy couple, Wharton is quick to establish tensions between the pair, many of which exist as a result of gender-based inequalities. Most immediately, there is the reason for their return—Alice's daughter, Lily, has fallen ill. Unlike Mr. Waythorn, the marriage is not Alice's first: she has been married twice before, first to Mr. Haskett, and later to Mr. Varick. Their immensely different romantic pasts prove to be just the beginning of the imbalance that exists between Mr. and Mrs. Waythorn as a couple. As the reader will realize by the story's end, the Waythorn marriage is anything but loving and equal. Through the Waythorns' rocky relationship, Wharton makes a broader statement about gender inequality and married couples, suggesting that marriage is an institution that forces women into submission. Within the confines of a marriage, women are all too often treated as objects that men own—not full people in their own right.

Throughout the story, Waythorn is horrified at the thought of Alice possessing even the smallest amount of agency. This becomes particularly apparent in Waythorn's eventual sympathy for Alice's first husband, Mr. Haskett. Waythorn comes to feel pity for Haskett because he believes that Haskett has been somehow wronged by Alice's conniving opportunism (divorcing him for a wealthier man). Waythorn realizes that "all he had learned [of Haskett] was favourable." Waythorn feels it is honorable for Haskett to do things for his daughter, Lily: upending his life, moving to a new city to be near her, and visiting her regularly and express concern for her wellbeing. And yet, Waythorn does not extend the same sympathies to Alice. He never considers that his wife's strategy of "moving up" might be motivated by the promise of a better life for her daughter. In Waythorn's eyes, Haskett is honest and motivated, while Alice is conniving and blindly opportunistic. As a man, Haskett's motivations are virtuous. As a woman, Alice's are viewed in a harsher light. When Waythorn regretfully admits that he "had been allowed to infer that Alice's first husband was a brute," he reveals that he would rather that Alice had been abused or belittled by her first husband, because this would deny her relative agency in the matter. What's more, it would render her a helpless victim—a damsel in distress in need of saving. Where Alice assumes the role of victim, Waythorn may render himself the hero. Ultimately, Waythorn would prefer to accept that his wife had been harmed or wronged by a man than that she could have had the intellectual or emotional capacity to make decisions based on wants and desires rather than by needs, suggesting that their marriage is based on an imbalanced power dynamic rather than genuine love and care.

Another example of gender inequality is Waythorn's tendency to expresses the jealousy he feels over Alice in monetary terms. The economic aspect of Waythorn's jealousy creates an imbalance in his marriage, transforming Alice from an equal companion to an object to be owned and coveted. Sick with jealousy over the influence the ex-husbands seem to have had on Alice's present personality, Waythorn curses the naiveté with which he once supposed "that a woman can shed her past like a man." When Waythorn married Alice, he believed that he could get over the fact that he wasn't the first to do so—that he could accept that there were other men who had loved her before he'd even had the chance to know her. Wharton draws out the moment Waythorn understands the consequences of his naïve assumption with an evocative rendering of Waythorn as "a member of a syndicate" in which "he held so many shares in his wife's personality and his predecessors were his partners in the business." In this comparison, Waythorn configures himself and Alice's ex-husbands to be ex-owners of Alice, rather than ex-lovers. Waythorn's refiguring of the husbands as owners and Alice as their property effectively rips Alice of her subjecthood. When Waythorn additionally wonders "if it were not better to own a third of a wife who knew how to make a man happy than a whole one who lacked opportunity to acquire the art," Waythorn again conceives of his relationship with Alice as a type of ownership. In this passage, he divides her into three pieces, like shares of property to be owned, lost, and gained by each husband. Lastly, the reader may refer to a passage early in the text where Waythorn describes the beginnings of their courtship. Knowing Alice's history of divorce and remarriage, many people raised their eyebrows at Waythorn's decision to marry her. Waythorn states that "In the Wall Street phrase, he had 'discounted' them." Again, Waythorn uses economic or business terminology to talk about his romance and relationship with Alice, situating her as more of an asset to be attained than a lover to be romanced.

Despite being perceived as property by her husband, however, Alice is held to a higher standard in maintaining emotional peace and tranquility in their marriage. In the beginning of the story, when Alice first informs her husband that Haskett will visit their home the next day, Waythorn responds coldly. He feels ill at the thought of another man stepping foot in his private **home**. Knowing that Haskett is legally permitted to see

his daughter, however, he ultimately accepts this unpleasant development. In an effort to maintain some amount of control, he orders Alice to move on from brooding over this unpleasant matter. Immediately, Waythorn observes that "her own [eyes] were quite clear and untroubled: he saw that she had obeyed his injection and forgotten." Alice's discomfort (in this instance, she is upset about having to see Mr. Haskett) is always less important than her husband's. Waythorn's discomfort must always be absolved, often at the expense of Alice's. Later on in the text, Waythorn discovers that Alice has lied to him about seeing Haskett on his first visit with Lily. Even though she originally insisted that she'd neither seen nor spoke to the man, Haskett reveals the two had a rather unpleasant and unproductive disagreement that day. Alice's lie angers her husband, but the fact that Alice didn't somehow "divine" that meeting with Haskett would upset her husband in the first place "was almost as disagreeable to the latter as the discovery that she had lied to him." In Waythorn's mind, Alice must be able to sense what he wants before he says it. In contrast, Waythorn extends no effort to separate Alice's inner life from her outer actions. Waythorn's relationship to Alice's calm, polite disposition illustrates an additional asymmetry in their relationship. Reflecting on his wife's calm demeanor, Waythorn notes that "her composure was restful to him; it acted as a ballast to his somewhat unstable sensibilities." Mr. Waythorn takes it for granted that Alice is naturally, or even accidentally calm. He fails to see her calmness as a conscious action she performs in order to make him feel comfortable. Again, this demonstrates the inequality of their relationship, in this instance as it regards the emotional accountability of either spouse.

The Waythorns' absorption of Alice's two ex-husbands into their social life might incite rising spousal tensions, but Wharton ultimately reveals the true source of their marital discontent to be an underlying framework of gender inequalities and asymmetries—a critique that pertains not only to "The Other Two," but to the larger issue of gender inequality in the early 1900s when the story was written.

SOCIAL ADVANCEMENT

Mr. Waythorn might be the primary breadwinner in "The Other Two," but it's his wife, Alice Waythorn, who most embodies the ideals of social advancement and self-improvement that were prevalent during the Gilded Age, when the story was published. As a woman, Alice Waythorn takes full advantage of one of the few methods by which she may improve her social standing: marriage. As the story progresses, the reader—and Mr. Waythorn—learns that Alice Waythorn wasn't always a woman of social and economic importance. Her first husband, Mr. Haskett, is a common man of limited means. Unsatisfied with the life he could provide her, she marries Mr. Varick, who provides her with material comforts but broke the bonds of marital fidelity. Unsatisfied, still, with Varick's failure to honor his marriage vows, Alice marries "up" once more, to Mr. Waythorn, who she believes will provide her with wealth, status, and loyalty. But remarrying doesn't permit Alice to improve *herself*—only to gain a new and improved identity each time she binds herself to a new, seemingly better husband. Alice can't be fully blamed for her imperfect opportunism: the compromised social status of women at the turn of the century would have prevented her from seeking opportunity in other, more effective ways afforded to men. Still, Alice's opportunistic, strategic marriages take a toll on the relationships she has with her husbands of past and present. In "The Other Two," Wharton explores the drastic steps Alice takes to advance her social standing. Wharton melds the domestic sphere (the Waythorn marriage) with the social sphere (polite society) in order to illustrate the pervasive culture of social advancement and self-improvement in the Gilded Age, and the negative effects this culture has on sincerity and intimacy in personal relationships.

The perpetual shifting of identities that Alice undergoes makes it impossible for Mr. Waythorn to know or love the real Alice—he only knows the version of her that she has become to achieve and succeed at this current marriage. Waythorn reflects on his wife's previous legal identities: "Alice Haskett—Alice Varick—Alice Waythorn—she had been each in turn, and had left hanging to each name a little of her privacy, a little of her personality, a little of her inmost self where the unknown god abides." Waythorn believes that Alice sacrifices her genuine self in order to move up in the world, fragmenting her personality further and further with each subsequent marriage, until there is only a sliver left of herself to give. What she gains in status, Waythorn concludes, she loses in personal identity. Waythorn states that "Haskett's commonness had made Alice worship good breeding, while Varick's liberal construction of the marriage bond had taught her to value the conjugal virtues." Waythorn divides the different facets of his wife's personality to the different men to whom she once belonged, once again emphasizing that her identity is a constantly shifting response to the men in her life.

Waythorn feels used by Alice's method of social advancement. Waythorn is deeply "disturbed" when he first sees Haskett, who is harmless in his economic insignificance and commonness. On realizing that Alice left Haskett not for his brutishness (the story she's spun for Waythorn) but for his lack of means, Waythorn realizes that husbands are not romantic companions to Alice, but tools by which she may move up in the world. With this, Waythorn comes to the conclusion that Alice might not love *him* as much as she loves the lifestyle his economic status allows her to enjoy. Once he learns the truth about Alice's motivations to remarry, Waythorn talks about the past marriages in objective, nonromantic terms. Miserably, he has no choice but to realize that his marriage to Alice is, too, a

continuation of this opportunistic pattern, and this diminishes the intimacy he feels towards his wife.

Waythorn repeatedly uses theater imagery in his musings about Alice and her opportunistic actions. The theatrical language and imagery imply a phoniness or staged quality to the way Waythorn perceives Alice's personality and actions within their marriage. Waythorn describes Alice's marriage to Varick as "a passport to the set whose recognition she coveted." A set, or staging, is false, and disallows for intimacy between married partners. Waythorn also observes that "It was as if her whole aspect, every gesture, inflection, every allusion, were a studied negation of that period of her life." He compares Alice's role as wife to the studied mannerisms of an actress, and therefore considers their marriage to be only a performance.

Alice Waythorn sees marriage as the only viable means by which she may enter into polite society, and the result is a blurring of the line between the private world of intimacy (marriage and companionship) and the public world of society (social and economic status). Alice chooses her husbands, not as companions, but as passports into a richer, more prestigious way of life. The tragic result is a series of relationships devoid of intimacy and genuine connection, a problem that echoes the larger Gilded Age pattern of destructive social climbing that Wharton sought to critique.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE HOME

Mr. Waythorn and Mrs. Alice Waythorn's home symbolizes the private sphere of life. Mr. Waythorn feels comfortable in his home and is most content in his relationship when it is just he and Alice together in their private world. When the Waythorns are together in the home, Mr. Waythorn finds comfort in Alice's collectedness. Conflict builds in Mr. Waythorn *and* in his relationship when outside, public forces threaten to invade the private sphere, robbing Mr. Waythorn of his ownership and his control. When Waythorn, Alice, and Alice's ex-husbands (Mr. Varick and Mr. Haskett) are inadvertently thrown together in the Waythorn's home, the public world essentially intrudes on Mr. Waythorn's private space—and, by extension, his marriage—and he becomes anxious and uncomfortable despite his poised demeanor. This intrusion causes Alice's pristine, perpetual politeness to lose its calming effect, and instead incites uncertainty and frustration in Waythorn. The Waythorns' home, then, serves as a symbolic meeting point between the comfort of the external façade they present to the outside world, and the tumultuous reality of their inner lives and strained marriage.

HASKETT'S TIE

Haskett's tie signifies his greatest flaw in Alice's eyes: he is not a "brute," rather, he is common. Waythorn sees Haskett's noticeably ragged tie the first time he meets him and immediately realizes that the man is not at all who he expected him to be. In fact, he goes so far as to consider Haskett's "made-up," shabby tie to be "the key to Alice's past." Before learning the truth about Haskett, the man—and Mrs. Waythorn's life with him—was cloaked in mystery, and Mr. Waythorn had been able to believe that his wife was the blameless victim of a cruel, brutish husband. Seeing Haskett's tie, however, permits Waythorn to discover the truth behind the Haskett marriage and divorce, and to see the desperate desire for social advancement that motivates Alice's numerous marriages. The appearance of Haskett's tie represents a crucial moment of conflict in the story, in which Waythorn must seriously question the assumptions he has made about his wife's history and personality.

THE TEA-TABLE

The tea-table present in the final scene of "The Other Two" represents propriety, as well as the choice Mr. Waythorn and Mrs. Alice Waythorn have made to prioritize etiquette over honesty. At the end of the story, Mr. Waythorn and Mrs. Waythorn, Mr. Varick, and Mr. Haskett find themselves unexpectedly thrown together in the Waythorns' library. Before anybody has a chance to remove themselves from this awkward situation, Alice cheerfully offers them tea, and, lest they appear rude and improper, they have no choice but to accept. Tea figures prominently in the culture of upper-class, polite society, and Wharton's choice to feature a drink and social event with such sophisticated connotations at the conclusion of "The Other Two" carries great symbolic weight. The central conflict of "The Other Two" centers around Mr. Waythorn's battle between acting on his jealousy (and thus acting genuinely) and doing what is polite (and thus practicing proper etiquette). The tea-table—placed, fittingly, in the center of these four reluctantly poised, polite characters—signifies that the Waythorns have chosen to continue in the rules and rituals of polite society rather than to address the jealousies and hidden truths that gnaw at the integrity of their marriage.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Roman Fever and Other Stories* published in 1964.

Part I Quotes

Her composure was restful to him; it acted as a ballast to his somewhat unstable sensibilities. As he pictured her bending over the child's bed he thought how soothing her presence must be in illness: her very step would prognosticate recovery.

Related Characters: Mrs. Alice Waythorn, Mr. Waythorn

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

As Mr. Waythorn waits for his new wife to join him at the dinner table, he reflects on what he loves most about her.

In particular, Waythorn expresses admiration for Alice's "composure." Waythorn believes that his wife's calmness and astute social sensibilities counteract his self-proclaimed "somewhat unstable sensibilities," and he takes pleasure in how well their personalities mesh with one another's, as in the clichéd sentiment that "opposites attract." What's more, Waythorn covets Alice's calmness, believing that it exists as the perfect counterbalance to his own lack thereof. Wharton solidifies this sentiment with Waythorn's hyperbolic belief that Alice's calm temperament would "prognosticate recovery," or bring about healing. Waythorn's exaggerated faith in Mrs. Waythorn's calmness shows how importantly it figures into their relationship.

This early reflection on Alice's calmness also hints at the gender inequalities that exist within the Waythorn marriage—glaring asymmetries that will become more apparent and relevant as the story unfolds. Mrs. Waythorn's composure serves to stabilize her husband, but it seems unlikely that her husband (and his "unstable sensibilities") would be able to offer any comfort in return. As a woman, Mrs. Waythorn is expected to comfort both husband and child—yet she herself expects (and receives) no comfort in return.

He knew that society had not yet adapted itself to the consequences of divorce and that till the adaptation takes place every woman who uses the freedom the law accords her must be her own social justification.

Related Characters: Mrs. Alice Waythorn, Mr. Waythorn

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

As he waits for her to join him at the dinner table, Waythorn reflects on his new wife, Mrs. Alice Waythorn, and her somewhat scandalous background.

Waythorn recalls how many friends and acquaintances (members of the upper class, of which Waythorn is a member) had expressed their doubts when Waythorn first decided to marry his new wife. Before she was Mrs. Alice Waythorn, Alice had been married and divorced twice—a sequence of events frowned upon by polite society. Despite the technical legality of Mrs. Waythorn's divorces, society remained suspicious of their moral legitimacy, the presumption being that it must have been a flaw or moral shortcoming of Mrs. Waythorn's that prompted the need for divorce in the first place. When a woman acts as "her own social justification," thus, she must prove (to a skeptical crowd) that she has valid and honorable reasons for seeking divorce.

Waythorn sets himself apart from his doubters. Compared to the rest of society, who "had not yet adapted itself to the consequences of divorce," he, Mr. Waythorn, is ahead of the game. Not only does Waythorn see and understand Mrs. Waythorn's "social justification" (he believes her first husband to be a brute, her second husband to be a shameless philanderer, and she to be the hapless victim of them both), he believes that he is forward-thinking in general: that he has "adapted" in some special way that allows him to confidently (and without judgment or jealousy) marry a woman with considerable relationship baggage.

In this passage, Wharton illustrates the hubristic calm before the storm, for Waythorn ultimately will look back on these naive sentiments of confident with shame and embarrassment, realizing that he hasn't "adapted" as significantly as he'd thought.

Part II Quotes

As his door closed behind him he reflected that before he opened it again it would have admitted another man who had as much right to enter it as himself, and the thought filled him with a physical repugnance.

Related Characters: Mr. Haskett, Mr. Waythorn

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Waythorn leaves for work the morning after Mrs. Waythorn has reluctantly informed him that Mr. Haskett, her first husband, will visit his and Mrs. Waythorn's daughter, Lily, in the Waythorn home. Because Lily Haskett is sick with typhoid, their weekly visit cannot take place outside the home, as is the usual arrangement.

The anticipation of Haskett's visit is particularly taxing for Waythorn, as it symbolizes an intrusion into his home by a strange, outside force. For Mr. Waythorn, the private sphere of the home represents peace and safety. In contrast to the chaos of the public sphere that lies beyond his front door, the home is a place where the insensible, anxious Mr. Waythorn may relax and feel a relative calm.

If the outside world is public, the inside world of the home is private—and what is private is owned. Mr. Waythorn is comforted by the relative calm of his home, but he also takes pleasure in the fact that the home—and everything (and everyone) that resides within it is *his*. Thus, Haskett's visit upsets Waythorn because he perceives it as a symbolic seizure of his personal property. The law provides Haskett "as much right" to enter Waythorn's property as Waythorn, so Waythorn's previous confidence of complete ownership is destabilized. What's more, Waythorn situates Mrs. Waythorn as an extension of the home; that is, Mrs. Waythorn is also calm, comforting, and owned by Mr. Waythorn. If Haskett's visit represents a threat to Waythorn's ownership of the home, it also represents a threat to his ownership of Mrs. Waythorn.

> What was he thinking of—only the flavour of the coffee and the liqueur? Had the morning's meeting left no more trace in his thoughts than on his face? Had his wife so completely passed out of his life that even this odd encounter with her present husband, within a week after her remarriage, was no more than an incident in his day?

Related Characters: Mr. Gus Varick, Mr. Waythorn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Waythorn anguishes over his second encounter with Gus Varick, Mrs. Waythorn's second husband. Their first meeting occurred on the "elevated" train on the way to work, and Waythorn found it awkward and unsettling to have to make small talk with his new wife's most recent ex-husband. As if this weren't enough, Waythorn happened to choose the same restaurant as Varick for lunch later that day, though this time he was fortunate enough to remain unnoticed by Varick.

From a table across the room, Waythorn watches Varick eat and drink. He fixates on the confident carelessness of Varick in disbelief: "What was he thinking of—only the flavour of the coffee and the liqueur?" Their earlier encounter on the train was unsettling and awkward for Waythorn, and he is jealous of Varick's ability to appear so unfazed. Waythorn is extremely self-conscious of his self-proclaimed social insensibilities, and desires above all to appear calm, composed, and polite while he is out in the world. Varick, for whom the morning encounter, Waythorn believes, has "left no more trace in his thoughts than on his face," represents Waythorn's ideal public persona.

Part III Quotes

> But this other man…it was grotesquely uppermost in Waythorn's mind that Haskett had worn a made-up tie attached with an elastic. Why should that ridiculous detail symbolise the whole man? Waythorn was exasperated by his own paltriness, but the fact of the tie expanded, forced itself on him, became as it were the key to Alice's past.

Related Characters: Mr. Haskett, Mrs. Alice Waythorn, Mr. Waythorn

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Haskett's "made-up tie attached with elastic" is a major symbol in "The Other Two." When Waythorn unexpectedly meets Haskett for the first time (it has slipped his mind that it's the day of Haskett's weekly visit, and Waythorn has returned home from work at the normal time), he is shocked and embarrassed to see that Haskett is the opposite of who and what he expected him to be.

Based on Mrs. Waythorn's feelings towards the man, Waythorn had expected Haskett to be a tyrannical brute. But as he takes in the shabbiness of Haskett's appearance—in particular, as he notices the horrible, tacky

tie—Waythorn realizes that Haskett's biggest flaw is not his lack of moral integrity, but his lack of funds. Waythorn looks at Haskett's tie and sees, at once, all that has motivated Mrs. Waythorn to marry and divorce so liberally. Though Waythorn had once figured Alice Waythorn as the victim and her ex-husbands as the villains, he now sees that Alice had more agency in the matter than he'd previously assumed. For Alice Waythorn, divorce serves not as an escape from abuses and injustices, but as an opportunity for social advancement. Dissatisfied with Haskett's limited means, with the shabbiness of his "made-up tie," Alice sought divorce and remarriage as a means to move up in the world. To Waythorn, Haskett's tie—and the revelations it represents—marks a crucial turning point in his perception of and relationship to Alice.

❝ It was as if her whole aspect, every gesture, every inflection, every allusion, were a studied negation of that period of her life.

Related Characters: Mrs. Alice Waythorn, Mr. Waythorn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Waythorn anguishes over how wrong and naïve he was about his wife's sense of composure. Though before he had found Alice's calmness and social grace comforting, he now sees it as a deceptive performance.

Of note in this passage is Wharton's evocation of theatrical language in Waythorn's modified assessment of Alice. Waythorn dissects the minutia of Alice's personality, down to "every gesture, every inflection, every allusion," interpreting each as merely "studied" habits she has adopted to thrive in her newly lavish lifestyle. When Waythorn saw Alice's tact as sincere, it was able to comfort him. He believed that her calmness was the natural, perfect accompaniment to his relative instability—that they were, in this way, meant to be. But as he comes to understand that Alice's mannerisms are in fact "studied," he realizes that he's been played. Mrs. Waythorn has repeatedly modified her personality in order to become the wife each of her husbands needed her to be—and Waythorn is no exception.

❝ A man would rather think that his wife has been brutalised by her first husband than that the process has been reversed.

Related Characters: Mr. Haskett, Mrs. Alice Waythorn, Mr. Waythorn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

When Waythorn uncovers the truth behind Mrs. Waythorn's motivations for marriage and divorce, it destroys the image he had of his wife as victim.

If Waythorn could believe his wife had been "brutalised," he could just as easily believe that he was the one to save her—to lift her up from her wretched condition and into a life of privilege and social prominence. If "the process had been reversed," however, Mr. Waythorn's role of hero would also be upended. If Mrs. Waythorn is not a victim, then Mr. Waythorn is not necessarily a hero.

What's more, this realization shatters the illusion of ownership and control Waythorn once believed he held over his wife, emphasizing the inequality on which their relationship has always been built. Waythorn "would rather think that his wife had been brutalised" than entertain the notion that she could be capable of possessing agency and making her own decisions. What is most shocking to Waythorn, though, is the possibility that Mrs. Waythorn might make decisions informed by her own interests over the interests of her husband (whether he be Haskett, Varick, or Waythorn). In the beginning of "The Other Two," Waythorn believes that Mrs. Waythorn acts calmly to soothe him: he sees it as a "ballast" to his comparably unstable mannerisms. As the story unfolds, however, Waythorn must accept that his wife's calm demeanor is primarily self-serving.

Part IV Quotes

❝ She was 'as easy as an old shoe' —a shoe that too many feet had worn. Her elasticity was the result of tension in too many different directions. Alice Haskett—Alice Varick—Alice Waythorn—she had been each in turn, and had left hanging to each name a little of her privacy, a little of her personality, a little of the inmost self where the unknown god abides.

Related Characters: Mr. Gus Varick, Mr. Haskett, Mr. Waythorn, Mrs. Alice Waythorn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Waythorn continues to anguish over Alice's pliancy when she suggests that it would be less awkward to "accept" Varick into their social lives.

Still in a state of shock, he remains unable to fathom that Alice could be opportunistic in her own right. To accept Alice's self-serving agenda (fueled by her desire to move up in society) would mean to *also* accept that he, too, has been duped by Alice in her quest for social advancement—that Alice had only pretended to be the wife Waythorn desired in order to marry him and partake of his wealth, just as she did to Gus Varick before him.

If Waythorn wants to hold tightly to the illusion that he is not a victim of a scheming wife, it becomes necessary to strip her of her ability to scheme in the first place. By comparing Alice to a shoe, as he does here, Waythorn reduces his wife to an object devoid of agency and insight. Waythorn's logic denies Alice the status of calculating villainess, aligning her instead with the status of hapless hand-me-down, "a shoe that too many feet had worn," her "elasticity" not the deliberate quality of a woman determined to move up in the world, but rather the bi-product of an object used and reused far beyond its recommended sell-by date.

Part V Quotes

❝ He could have forgiven her for blunders, for excesses; for resisting Haskett, for yielding to Varick; for anything but her acquiescence and her tact.

Related Characters: Mr. Haskett, Mr. Gus Varick, Mrs. Alice Waythorn, Mr. Waythorn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

When unexpected circumstances throw Mrs. Waythorn's two ex-husbands into the Waythorns' public and private lives, Alice's tact becomes unbearable to Waythorn.

This passage holds ironic significance when compared to an earlier passage of the story in which Mr. Waythorn reveals his initial assessment of Alice's tact. Even before Mrs. Waythorn makes her first appearance in the story, the reader is introduced to her signature personality trait—her impeccable tactfulness—when newly-wed Mr. Waythorn situates Alice's calm demeanor as the root of his adoration, referring to her calmness as "a ballast to his somewhat unstable sensibilities," and suggesting that the mere calming presence of his well-mannered bride could cure Lily Haskett of her ills.

These hyperbolic exaltations are a striking contrast to Waythorn's ultimate hatred for Alice's tact. By the end of the story, Waythorn would give anything to know, if even for a moment, what Alice *really* thinks about her two ex-husbands. Because Alice remains polite and (almost) unreadable in the company of Haskett and Varick, Waythorn's imagination is free to run wild, and his jealousy knows no bounds. When Waythorn states that "he could have forgiven her for blunders, for excesses," he confirms that he's finally had enough of the etiquette and composure he once found so restful and reassuring.

❝ With grim irony Waythorn compared himself to a member of a syndicate. He held so many shares in his wife's personality and his predecessors were his partners in the firm.

Related Characters: Mr. Haskett, Mr. Gus Varick, Mrs. Alice Waythorn, Mr. Waythorn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

When Mr. Haskett and Mr. Gus Varick become undeniably situated in the Waythorns' lives, Mr. Waythorn has no choice but to revisit his naive belief that Mrs. Waythorn could wholly discard her relationship baggage and start anew with each subsequent marriage.

Waythorn realizes that Mrs. Waythorn retains residual personality quirks, preferences, and habits as she progresses from marriage to marriage. Such an epiphany is jarring to Mr. Waythorn, as it confirms what he dreads most—that Mrs. Waythorn will never be his and his alone. In "compar[ing] himself to a member of a syndicate," he positions himself as one among a larger group of men who, together, own a single piece of property. In this comparison, Mrs. Waythorn is rendered more akin to a timeshare yacht than a romantic partner.

In analyzing the female objectification contained within this passage, one must note the economic terms Waythorn evokes to categorize the ex-husbands' and his relationship to Mrs. Waythorn. Rather than refer to Mr. Varick and Mr. Haskett as ex-lovers or ex-husbands, Mr. Waythorn refers to them as "predecessors" and "partners in the firm." By

categorizing Waythorn, Haskett, and Varick as "partners," Wharton further emphasizes the severity of Mr. Waythorn's objectification of Alice. Ultimately, Waythorn's economic language speaks to the central issue of his troubling reassessment of Alice: that he can't own her completely—not because she owns herself, but because others have owned her before him.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART I

Waythorn, a businessman in his mid-thirties, waits before the hearth for his wife, Mrs. Alice Waythorn, to come downstairs for dinner. They Waythorns are newlyweds, and Mr. Waythorn waits gleefully for Alice to arrive, "surprised at his thrill of boyish agitation." The couple has just returned to their New York City **home** from their honeymoon. The trip was cut short by the sudden illness of Alice's child from a previous marriage, Lily Haskett. At the story's beginning, Mrs. Waythorn is upstairs tending to her sick child.

Wharton sets the stage for the tensions that will present themselves as the story unfolds. Waythorn is in his mid-thirties—somewhat old for a first marriage, Waythorn observes that he is "surprised" at his juvenile excitement because he would like to see himself as a grown, composed man. Mrs. Waythorn, too, bears the marks of age and experience: she has been married at least once before, and has the baggage to prove it—another man's child. Of note, as well, is that the story opens in the Waythorn home. Wharton's choice to begin in this space foreshadows the symbolic significance that the home holds for Waythorn.

Alice allows herself only "a moment of alarm" to register that her child is ill with typhoid, after which she immediately composes herself. Waythorn remarks that "no woman ever wasted less tissue in unproductive worry." He admires his wife's calm disposition, stating that Alice's "composure was restful to him."

The reader is introduced to a crucial element of Alice's personality—her polite calmness. Wharton juxtaposes an extremely upsetting situation (a gravely ill child) with Alice's hyperbolically understated reaction (only "a moment of alarm") to underscore and even criticize the extreme lengths to which Alice will go to appear polite and composed. The reader also sees how Waythorn responds to Alice's calm mannerisms –he admires her manners and considers her temperament "restful."

As he waits, Waythorn continues to reflect on his new wife, turning his attention to her history. The reader learns that Alice has been married twice before: first, to Mr. Haskett, an out-of-towner from either Pittsburg or Utica (not much is known of Haskett), and later to Mr. Gus Varick, an upper-class New Yorker with decadent tastes and philandering habits. Though scandalous for the times, Alice's two divorces are forgotten amidst her "undoubted connection with a socially reigning family," as well as her esteemed social poise. Alice's status and manners give her the social status and "recognition she coveted," and when she was married to Varick, they were considered to be "the most popular couple in town."

This section gives the reader background information on Alce life before her marriage to Mr. Waythorn. Wharton emphasizes how significantly Mrs. Waythorn's manners contribute to her ability to be liked and respected in society: under normal circumstances, two divorces might have been scandalous enough to warrant social ostracism. But Mrs. Waythorn's impeccable understanding of etiquette allows her to remain accepted and liked in her social circle. A secondary reason for society's acceptance of the twice-divorced Mrs. Waythorn is the general mystery that surrounds her past. Because not much is known of Haskett or of the circumstances that led to the Haskett divorce, society—and Mr. Waythorn—is willing to give Alice the benefit of the doubt.

Waythorn recalls that "people shook their heads over him" when they learned he planned to marry this two-time divorcee, but he "affirmed that he took the step with his eyes open." Waythorn believes that society's stigma against divorce is unreasonable, and he expresses his "amused confidence in his wife's ability to justify herself." Indeed, he is enamored of his wife, and believes that he's "found refuge in a richer, warmer nature than his own."

Alice is well liked, but her scandalous history of divorce is still seen as a problem by society. Waythorn shows how confidently he rejected the disapproval of his engagement to Mrs. Waythorn, stating that he "affirmed that he took the step with his eyes open." He shakes his head at the antiquated societal stigma of divorce, instead expressing confidence in his wife's ability to act on her own accord and in his own ability to love, without jealousy or embitterment, a woman with such substantial baggage.

Mr. Waythorn's pleasant thoughts are interrupted when Alice finally arrives downstairs. With a look of worry on her face, she relates that "something tiresome has happened." She has received a letter from Mr. Haskett's lawyer. Haskett has an arrangement to visit with his daughter once a week. Normally Lily would go to him, but owing to her sickness, Haskett finds it preferable that his visit with Lily takes place at the Waythorn **home**. Waythorn is visibly perturbed by the notion of Haskett intruding on his home, but he reluctantly agrees to allow it. He orders Alice to "try to forget about it," and she obeys immediately, exclaiming, "How pretty everything is!"

Alice's entrance coincides with the first sure sign of conflict in "The Other Two." The problem of Haskett's visit holds symbolic weight, as it involves a stranger intruding upon the sacred space of the home. Further, it puts Waythorn's supposed lack of insecurity to the test. He might have disregarded society's concerns when he married Mrs. Waythorn—but will he be able to remain unstirred if he comes face to face with Haskett? While before the issue of the ex-husbands was only a theoretical one, Haskett's visit transforms it into a real concern. Lastly, Alice's remark of "How pretty everything is!" in response to Waythorn's order to forget Haskett's visit emphasizes how readily Alice obeys Waythorn as her husband.

PART II

Waythorn leaves for work the next morning, "earlier than usual." The thought of Haskett's visit "drove him forth." He makes plans to stay out all day—perhaps arranging to have dinner at his club later on. He closes his **front door** and realizes that "before he opened it again it would have admitted another man," Haskett, "who had as much right to enter it as himself."

Waythorn's insecurities show in his decision to leave for work early in order to avoid Haskett. He is deeply unsettled at the thought of an outsider entering his private home, especially when he "had as much right to enter it as himself." Haskett has a "right to enter" because he is Lily's father and Alice's ex-husband. Haskett's relationship to Waythorn's family and the rights it affords him bothers Mr. Waythorn.

Waythorn rides the exceptionally crowded "elevated" train to work. A man moves into a space uncomfortably close to him. Waythorn sees that the man is Gus Varick, Alice's second husband. Their close proximity renders it impossible to avoid engaging one another in conversation, and so they make friendly, if mildly awkward, small-talk. "Lord," announces Varick, "I was beginning to feel like a pressed flower." He then informs Waythorn that Waythorn's senior partner at his office, Mr. Sellers, has fallen ill. Sellers's illness is particularly annoying for Varick, as Sellers had just taken him on as a client. The train arrives at Varick's stop, and the two men part ways.

The crowded train is a marked contrast to the quiet, peaceful home. The reader is meant to see how the chaos unsettles Mr. Waythorn. Wharton purposely places Waythorn's interaction with Varick next to the announcement of Haskett's visit to illustrate how suddenly and intensely the two ex-husbands have entered into Waythorn's life.

At the office, Waythorn confirms Varick's information—Sellers has indeed fallen ill with gout. The senior clerk relays Sellers's apology for all the extra work his illness will create for Waythorn. Waythorn is glad to get the extra work, as it will require him to stop by Sellers's house to touch base on his way home from work.

The confirmation of Sellers's illness foreshadows the conflict (Waythorn ultimately having to take on Varick as a client) to come. Waythorn's enthusiasm for extra work emphasizes the lengths he's willing to go to avoid an awkward interaction with Haskett.

Waythorn leaves to eat lunch and crosses paths with Varick once more, though Varick fails to notice Waythorn. Varick, who is known "to be fond of good living," feasts on camembert and *café double* with cognac. As Waythorn observes his wife's ex-husband, he considers if Varick is at all rattled by their awkward encounter on the train: "Had the morning's meeting left no more trace in his thoughts than on his face?" he wonders.

Waythorn sees Varick's decadence as confidence—and he is threatened by it. When Waythorn wonders whether their awkward interaction on the train "left no more trace in his thoughts than on his face," he is measuring Varick's apparent social ease against his own lack thereof.

Waythorn arrives **home** after seven. He and Alice reunite in the drawing-room and recount their days to one another. Waythorn, "with a curious pang," observes that his wife "found a childish pleasure in rehearsing the trivial incidents of her day." The couple eats dinner and then retreats to the library for coffee and liqueurs. Alice appears "singularly soft and girlish in her rosy pale dress, against the dark leather of one of his bachelor armchairs." Waythorn notes, glumly, that "a day earlier the contrast would have charmed him."

Waythorn's goal of avoiding Haskett was successful, so the home becomes a place of peace and comfort once more. But Waythorn is still somewhat rattled by his run-in with Varick (evident in the observation that "a day earlier" his wife's pretty pink dress contrasted against his manly leather chair "would have charmed him), so he counteracts his insecurities by belittling his wife, noting her "childish pleasure" at telling him about her day.

Tensely, Waythorn inquires about Haskett's visit. After a slight pause, Alice says that though she didn't see Haskett herself, the visit was fine. Alice pours coffee into her husband's cup, followed by cognac. Waythorn reacts with a "sudden exclamation," then composes himself enough to say "I don't take cognac in my coffee."

Waythorn's "sudden exclamation" is triggered by his recollection of the decadent Varick pouring cognac into his coffee at the restaurant earlier that day. He imagines that Mrs. Waythorn accidentally did for him something she was in the habit of doing for Varick when they were married. Waythorn is upset by Mrs. Waythorn's past bleeding into her life with him in the present.

PART III

The story picks up 10 days later. Mr. Sellers remains ill, and Mr. Waythorn goes to his house to inquire about the additional responsibilities he will take on. "I'm sorry, my dear fellow," Sellers tells Waythorn. "I've got to ask you to do an awkward thing for me." He informs Waythorn of Varick's "rather complicated piece of business." Varick has come into a large sum of money and needs someone to advise him. The matter cannot wait, and it falls to Waythorn to deal with Varick. Waythorn hesitates, but ultimately gives in, reasoning that "the honour of the office was to be considered, and he could hardly refuse to oblige his partner."

The plot point foreshadowed in Waythorn and Varick's uncomfortable run-in on the train is confirmed: Waythorn will have to take on Varick as a client. Waythorn's hesitation implies the unease he feels at this proposition, but his desire to appear polite and composed (the traits he so admires in Alice) outweighs his desire to feel at ease, so he accepts the work.

Varick arrives at the office that afternoon. Waythorn notes that he "[bears] himself admirably." Waythorn self-consciously anguishes over what the others at his office will think of this unlikely new business relationship with his wife's ex-husband. Varick expresses his gratitude to Waythorn. He cites his financial inexperience, noting that "it feels uncommonly queer to have enough cash to pay one's bills. I'd have sold my soul for it a few years ago!"

As before, Waythorn contrasts Varick's confidence with his own internal feelings of unease. He's anxious about what his social circle will think of this odd relationship, and desires to appear the calmer of the two. Varick's awkward remark that it feels "uncommonly queer" to come into money implies that these funds might've saved his marriage to Mrs. Waythorn ("I'd have sold my soul for it a few years ago!").

Waythorn "wince[s]" at this remark, as it is known that "a lack of funds" was partially to blame for the divorce between Varick and Alice. He wonders whether in Varick's attempt to avoid broaching an awkward subject he has instead fallen knee-deep into one. Waythorn is ultimately pleased with the meeting, "glad, in the end, to appear the more self-possessed of the two."

Waythorn stops himself from responding ungracefully to Varick's social blunder (joking about the what-ifs that might have saved his marriage to Alice), choosing only to "wince." Waythorn feels proud to be the "winner" of this social exchange, having held himself more gracefully and politely than the usually confident Varick.

Lily Haskett continues to improve, and Waythorn's anxiety over Haskett, too, improves. He lets his guard down and doesn't bother staying out abnormally late on Haskett's visiting days. The following week, his carelessness gets the best of him and he enters the library "without noticing a shabby hat and umbrella in the hall." In the library, Waythorn sees "a small effaced-looking man with a thinnish grey beard." Waythorn compares the man to a piano-tuner, citing his unassuming presence and overall commonness. The man looks up and addresses Waythorn: "Mr. Waythorn, I presume? I am Lily's father."

Waythorn's carelessness gets the best of him, and he falls into a trap of his own accidental making: he catches Haskett in the act of intruding (legally) on his private home. Wharton lingers on the physical details of Haskett and his personal affects in order to emphasize his "commonness." The reader is meant to observe Haskett alongside Waythorn: to take him in from top to bottom, assessing, with surprise, every humble detail.

Waythorn is surprised and embarrassed. Haskett is not what he expected him to be. Based on Alice's descriptions and feelings toward Haskett, Waythorn "had been allowed to infer that Alice's first husband was a brute." In reality, Haskett behaves calmly, with "over-the-counter politeness." The men briefly discuss Lily's health, but Waythorn feels so uncomfortable and embarrassed that he exits the library almost immediately.

Waythorn is "embarrassed" because he had judged Haskett harshly (and incorrectly) in order to create a more palatable version of Alice's previous life. It is easier and preferable for Waythorn to believe that Haskett was "a brute," because it would allow Alice to fit into the role of "victim." If Alice is a victim, Waythorn can be her hero—the good husband who can swoop in, save her, and give her the life she deserves. But Haskett's humble appearance and "over-the-counter politeness" reveal a truth that Waythorn finds impossible to bear.

In his bedroom, Waythorn curses "the womanish sensibility which had made him suffer so acutely from the grotesque chances of life." He wonders how he could he have been so wrong about Mr. Haskett, and how he could have been so naive to think that marrying a woman with two living husbands would not present the opportunity for awkward run-ins. His semi-awkward encounters with Varick pale in comparison to this "intolerable" meeting with Haskett.

Haskett's commonness contradicts Waythorn's previous assumptions about his status and character. While he had previously been allowed to believe that Haskett was to blame for Mrs. Waythorn's first divorce (that she left him because he was an abusive tyrant), he now realizes that she left him because he was poor and she thought she could do better. If Haskett is not a brute, Waythorn can no longer see his wife as a victim.

Waythorn notices a photograph of Alice on his dressing-table. Alice wears a pearl necklace that had been gifted to her by Varick. Waythorn recalls how he forced her to get rid of the necklace before they were married. He wonders whether Haskett gifted her any jewelry, and what has become of it.

To Waythorn, Varick's necklace symbolizes the lingering presence of Alice's ex-husbands. While previously Waythorn had attempted to remove any physical traces of the ex-husbands, the sudden appearance of Haskett and Varick into the Waythorns' lives forces him to question how fully Mrs. Waythorn will ever be rid of her past.

These questions prompt Mr. Waythorn to consider the other unknown aspects of Alice's past life. An image of Haskett's "made-up **tie** attached with an elastic" flashes into Waythorn's mind, and he realizes that the tie is "the key to Alice's past." He sees his wife in a new light: one informed by origins humbler than he'd originally thought.

Waythorn's realizations about Haskett force him to see Alice in a new, more damning light. In Haskett's tie, Waythorn sees the common origins Alice loathed and longed to leave behind, as well as the opportunism (her desire for wealth, status, social acceptance) that presumably motivated her series of marriages and divorces. He realizes that Alice marries for social advancement, not for love, and that he is no different than the other two husbands. Waythorn now sees Haskett (and perhaps himself) as the victim, and Alice as the villain.

Waythorn thinks about Alice when she was Mrs. Haskett, "chafing at her life, and secretly feeling that she belonged in a bigger place." Most horrifying to Waythorn is "the way in which she had shed the phase of existence which her marriage with Haskett implied." Waythorn observes: "It was as if her whole aspect, every gesture, every inflection, every allusion, were a studied negation of that period of her life."

Though Waythorn had once admired and been comforted by Mrs. Waythorn's calm, polite composure, he now views her propriety as unsettling and false: a performance that she puts on in order to succeed in the new lifestyle that her marriage to Waythorn has afforded her.

PART IV

On Haskett's next visit, he informs Waythorn that he is dissatisfied with Lily's French governess. She "ain't right," and he would like her dismissed. Waythorn "stiffly" offers to pass along this information to Alice. Haskett doubts this will work, as Alice was unreceptive to his complaints the last time they spoke. Waythorn is shocked—his wife lied to him when she claimed that she hadn't seen Haskett on his first visit. But Haskett is persistent. "You can remind Alice that, by the decree of the courts," he says, "I am entitled to have a voice in Lily's upbringing." He then adds, "deprecatingly," that while he is "not the kind to talk about enforcing his rights [...] this business of the child is different. I've never let go there—and I never mean to."

Haskett's request, uttered "deprecatingly," emphasizes his humble, unintimidating presence. The love for Lily that motivates Haskett stirs feelings of sympathy in Haskett, thus reinforcing Waythorn's growing pity for Haskett and negative view of Alice. The discovery that Alice had lied to Waythorn about not seeing Haskett on his first visit reinforces this.

Waythorn is "shaken" by Haskett's appeal. He reflects on all that Haskett has done for Lily, such as abandoning a "profitable business in Utica" for a "modest clerkship in a New York manufacturing house" in order to be nearer to her. Waythorn compares delving into these realizations about Haskett's personality to "groping about with a dark-lantern in his wife's past." He thinks about the "ambiguities" of Haskett and Alice's divorce and wonders what sort of "unsuspected compromise" might Haskett's continuing legal rights to his daughter imply.

Waythorn anguishes some more over the previously established concerns and insecurities: he is disturbed by how little he knows about Alice's past (and by how naïve he was to originally think not-knowing would be okay), he feels pity at Haskett's love of Lily (and shame at originally judging this humble man when he knew nothing about him).

Waythorn relays Haskett's request to Alice. Visibly angered, she asserts that the request "is very ungentlemanly of him." Waythorn coldly tells his wife that it is her legal duty to honor Haskett's request, and Alice begins to cry. Haskett's request is honored, and Waythorn notes that he "did not abuse his rights." Waythorn reflects further on Haskett's humility and sincerity.

Waythorn responds coldly to Alice's remark about Haskett's request being "ungentlemanly" because he is still angry that she lied to him. Now that he's discovered the truth about Haskett, Waythorn views Haskett as victim, Alice as villain, and aligns himself with the former.

Mr. Sellers goes to Europe to improve his health. Mr. Varick's financial matter is still Waythorn's responsibility, and they maintain their professional relationship. Waythorn runs into Varick and Alice talking with one another at a social ball. "I didn't know you spoke to Varick," Waythorn offers, uncomfortably. Alice insists that "it would be less awkward" if the Waythorns were to speak to Varick socially as well as professionally. Waythorn reluctantly agrees with his wife.

Although Waythorn is uncomfortable with his wife (and himself) engaging with Varick in their social lives, he agrees to it because he values etiquette and composure more than he cares about feeling internally at ease. If speaking to Varick will please their social circle, Waythorn will swallow his pride and make nice.

PART V

The Waythorns' social circle is overjoyed that they have chosen to spare everyone the awkwardness of picking sides between them and Varick. Alice is regarded as a "a miracle of good taste."

Again, Alice uses her adaptability to earn points in society.

Waythorn anguishes once more over his naive presumption "that a woman can shed her past like a man." He realizes "that Alice was bound to hers both by the circumstances which forced her into continued relation with it, and by the traces it had left on her nature." Waythorn sees himself as "a member of a syndicate," as he "held so many shares in his wife's personality and his predecessors were partners in the business." Waythorn dissects his favorite aspects of his wife's personality—her faithfulness and love of etiquette—and attributes their origins to her ex-husbands. Waythorn reluctantly sinks into "complete acceptance" of the wife that is no longer solely his.

Waythorn used to love Mrs. Waythorn's mannerisms because he associated them with himself—he felt that her sensibilities offset his insensibilities. He grounded Alice's personality in the present; that is, as mannerisms she performed with him *in mind. Now, however, Waythorn sees Alice's personality as grounded in the past, or as remnants of the personalities she assumed to please her ex-husbands. He no longer feels that he can own all of Alice, because he only "held so many shares" of Alice's character. One must also note the economic language Wharton uses in this section—when Waythorn refers to Alice's personality in terms of "shares" of Alice, he strips her of her agency, reducing her to a mere object of currency passed down from husband to husband.*

On a later day, Waythorn comes **home** to find Haskett waiting for him in the library. He has come to inquire about Lily. Waythorn offers Haskett a cigar, and the two men sit smoking and talking, "enclosed in the intimacy of their blended cigar smoke."

Solidifying their new kinship, Waythorn offers Haskett a cigar. He now sees them as more alike than not—they are both victims of the opportunistic, calculating Alice Waythorn. The cigar offering places them on an equal ground.

Suddenly, the door opens and Varick enters the room. All three men are caught off-guard. Varick's "sanguine colour deepened to a flush," but he composes himself quickly. He has come to discuss business matters, and Waythorn offers him, too, a cigar.

Varick's "sanguine colour" betrays the distaste or embarrassment he feels at seeing Haskett, but his great sense of etiquette allows him to hide it quickly. The cigar that Waythorn offers Haskett doesn't emphasize a kinship with Varick (Wharton goes to great lengths to establish how uncomfortable Waythorn continues to feel around Varick) so much as Waythorn's careful, conscious choice to appear publicly accepting of Varick. In choosing to offer Varick a cigar, Waythorn has chosen, once more, etiquette over honesty.

The Waythorns' footman brings in a **tea-table**, and Varick begins to broach a subject of business. He is interrupted by Alice, who enters the library, "fresh and smiling," to have tea with her husband. She is pleased to see Varick and displeased to see Haskett. She composes herself and offers the men tea. Haskett and Varick accept, "as if drawn by her smile," and Waythorn accepts a third cup of tea "with a laugh."

The tea-table is highly symbolic of upper-class customs and the rituals of etiquette. Indulging in tea is a performance of good manners and social composure. That Alice, her two ex-husbands, and one current husband choose to sit around a table drinking tea together despite their unanimous discomfort signifies that they have all chosen to honor propriety over sincerity. Internally, the situation is a nightmare; but from the outside it appears to be only a table of happy acquaintances enjoying each other's delightful company.

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