

The Short-Term Marriage Plot: Narratives of Serial Monogamy

An opinion piece by Alain de Botton in the *New York Times* from the end of May lets us know, as the title indicates, “Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person”: despite thinking that we’re easy to get along with, we need to realize that we each bring some crazy (his notion, not mine) into the mix that emerges after being married for some time. “The good news is that it doesn’t matter if we find we have married the wrong person,” de Botton comforts us. “We mustn’t abandon him or her, only the founding Romantic idea upon which the Western understanding of marriage has been based the last 250 years: that a perfect being exists who can meet all our needs and satisfy our every yearning” (28 May 2016). We should instead accept the shortcomings of our partner and the failure of the union—“The failure of one particular partner to save us from our grief and melancholy is not an argument against that person and no sign that a union deserves to fail or be upgraded.” Thus, although more time together initially will reveal the answer to that question, ““And how are you crazy?”” a longer relationship could afford a couple time to work toward compatibility, instead of expecting it from the start as a precondition for love.

A wholly different approach was presented in a 2012 *New York Times* article in the Style section, which proposed a new way of thinking about the marriage contract. In “Till Death, or 20 Years, Do Us Part,” Matt Richtel suggests instead of a life-long marriage contract, it might instead expire at the twentieth anniversary—after children would have left the nest—to be renewed only if

desired. He takes his cues from a proposal several Mexico City lawmakers made in the prior year for short-term, renewable marriage contracts that could have terms of as little as two years. Both Richtel's 20-year contract and the Mexican lawmakers' two-year-and-up contracts aim to address the reality of marriage, or rather, the reality of divorce and marital unhappiness. Each takes into account that provisions would need to be made ahead of time for the marriages in which couples do not renew their contracts.

Although the idea of considering marriage as a contract is not new, which one of Richtel's interviewees acknowledges, it would seem to be a new direction “‘after a period of extreme romanticism.’” Another scholar of marriage and divorce referred to in the article discounts Richtel's 20-year contract suggestion in favor of a model that asks people to reassess their marriage around pivotal life events, such when a family deals with birth, death, changes in jobs, or children leaving home, moments when “‘marriage is most vulnerable.’” At these points, or every five years, a renewal would prompt the establishment of new vows that account for changes in the marriage. Practical details involving how the pre-agreements would be enforced, or what would happen if couples neglected to renew their contract, for example, were not addressed in these hypothetical revisions of the marriage contract. Also missing is a consideration of re-coupling—that is, of complications involved when people entering into a different two-year, five-year, twenty-year contract with someone new as soon as the previous contract is expired.

In both this short-term marriage proposal and the married-to-the-wrong-person argument, time is the pivotal variable. These models offer solutions for better marriages by dictating its length—either in perpetuity by eschewing divorce, or in finite terms by building in a divorce-like functionality. The former, seems regressive, suggesting that couples stick it out rather than avail themselves of legal dis-solution. The latter, the short-term marriage, is what I'd like to talk about today. This presentation examines models of limited-term marriages showcased in the fiction of Edith Wharton, and begins to consider how time functions in sequencing the short-term marriages into new courtship narratives.

"The Other Two," from Wharton's 1904 collection of short stories, *The Decent of Man*, begins with Waythorn having already married his wife but cutting his honeymoon short so that, we learn shortly into the story, she can tend to Lily Haskett, her sick child from an earlier marriage. We also learn retrospectively that after Mrs. Waythorn, 35 (or so she claims), was Mrs. Haskett, she was Mrs. Varick. No specific length is reported for the two terminated marriages, though Lily's age, 12 years, gives some indication of the start of the Haskett union. The major plot points revolve around the fact that with the daughter sick, her father, entitled to visitation one day a week, will need to visit her in Waythorn's home. Also, with his business partner suffering from gout, Waythorn must handle an intricate business deal for none other than Gus Varick. Despite his preference to avoid his two predecessors, he cannot. In these

interactions, Waythorn is forced to think about his wife's previous marriages—to read his wife and these men to understand their marriages.

As much as Waythorn wants to avoid thinking about the two marriages, the other two husbands make this unavoidable. Their continually popping up in Waythorn's home, business, social, and commuting spaces aggregate to make marriage repetitive in the story (first Haskett, then Varick, then Waythorn), as well as the telling of these marriages. In reading his wife's actions as telling of her past experiences, Waythorn comes to notice how adept she is in negotiating unpleasant situations, something he finds unbecoming as it suggests a kind of lack of honesty or integrity of character:

Her pliancy was beginning to sicken him. Had she really no will of her own—no theory about her relation to these men? She had accepted Haskett—did she mean to accept Varick? It was “less awkward,” as she had said, and her instinct was to evade difficulties or to circumvent them. With sudden vividness Waythorn saw how the instinct had developed. 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.

Alice is, Waythorn comes to realize, altered by each marriage, and therefore each name signals that different identity.

As “the winter wore on” (marker of time passing), Waythorn comes to realize the benefits to his wife’s approach to her social situation, especially since she could not “shed her past like a man.” The experiences she has had through these marriages have shaped her, such that “he held so many shares in his wife’s personality and his predecessors were his partners in the business....He even began to reckon up on the advantages which accrued from it, to ask himself 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 had lacked opportunity to acquire the art.” Offensive attitudes about wife-owning aside, what Waythorn posits is that with each marriage, Alice learned, grew, was marked in some way. “His domestic happiness” grew out of these responses: “he perceived that Haskett’s liberal commonness had made Alice worship good breeding, while Varick’s liberal construction of the marriage bond had taught her to value the conjugal virtues; so that he was directly indebted to his predecessors for the devotion which made his life easy if not inspiring.” Her first marriage, in upstate New York, necessarily preceded those in urban New York. Her second brought her into New York society. Had Alice not had so much marriage experience, she would not handle it as an art as she comes to do, and Waythorn might not have taken an interest in her. Thus these marriages are decidedly sequential.

I'd like to bring in two other Wharton texts, to consider trends in the short-term marriage plot. Nine years after "The Other Two," *The Custom of the Country*'s Undine Spragg might be a new Alice. Married young outside of New York society, she divorces young to move on to a new life and better status, repeatedly, since she views divorce as a means for social climbing. Another nine years later, in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Nick Lansing and Susy Branch greatly enjoy each other's company, but neither has the money necessary to support them in the upper class they have been born into, so they must either marry for money or not marry at all. The narrative begins with them already married, having enacted a plan to support their "mutual liking" founded on the premise that through divorce each can repeat the marriage act to keep in good financial and social standing (9). Their plan would, like Undine's, have them manipulate the traditional sequencing of courtship through divorce and remarriage, yet unlike Undine's actions, they establish rules together for the dissolution of their marriage. In both *The Custom of the Country* and *The Glimpses of the Moon*, like "The Other Two," at least one marriage has occurred by the start of the narrative, a significant feature of the narratives' order that deviates from the traditional romance plot. The ways the texts theorize divorce as a means of truncating a marriage is necessarily intertwined with its depiction of time.

The speed at which one could cycle through a marriage is highlighted in an exchange with Ellie and Nelson Vanderlyn's eight-year-old daughter Clarissa. Rather than simply concluding that Susy cannot afford more jewelry, she asks "Did you have to give up all your jewels when you were divorced?" Clarissa's question assumes that Susy must have owned more jewelry in the past, and that she could lose possessions and wealth in divorce. It also suggests that although the last time they saw each other Susy "wasn't even married" and now she is on her honeymoon, that she could have gotten married, divorced, and remarried in that time. The too-rapid succession does not seem problematic to Clarissa, as she tells Susy, "'But that was two years ago.'" Thus marriage and divorce have become so easily enacted that Clarissa assumes that in the span of two years, Susy could have repeated the act already. When Susy clarifies that she has not been divorced, Clarissa persists, asking Susy if she will be divorced soon "'Because you look so awfully happy'" (36). Wharton uses the eight-year-old's inappropriate mixture of maturity and naïveté to demonstrate that not only does divorce make marriage repeatable, it also leads to happiness, in much the same way that marriage would in the traditional marriage sequence. Divorce and remarriage, in this logic, have replaced engagement and marriage, providing what marriage cannot.

Early in *The Custom of the Country*, Undine, newly engaged to Ralph Marvell and out of her league with the social elite, particularly with her Old New

York future in-laws, suggests of another upwardly mobile newcomer that “I guess Mabel’ll get a divorce pretty soon...they like each other well enough. But he’s been a disappointment to her. He isn’t in the right set, and I think Mabel realizes she’ll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of him” (Wharton 1913, 94). Undine represents a view of divorce and remarriage as a means of acquiring what the current marriage has failed to provide, *ad infinitum*. Her response conveys an acknowledgement that a husband’s inability to move his wife upward socially is not proper grounds for divorce, but also her expectation that lying about the marriage is acceptable: “that wouldn’t be the reason given, of course. Any lawyer could fix it up for them. Don’t they generally call it desertion?” (95). Despite her recent engagement to Ralph, she finds no reason to keep quiet about these views. In a jocular rejoinder, Ralph brings his mother’s description of the drawbacks of divorce into the personal realm, warning Undine “you’d better think twice before you divorce me!” Undine’s “flung-back” response is in earnest, inculcating her fiancé in the process of marriage and divorce: ““Oh, it all depends on you! Out in Apex, if a girl marries a man who doesn’t come up to what she expected, people consider it’s to her credit to want to change. You’d better think twice of that!” (95-6). Although the tone is light, Undine is serious, and uses the moment to express what it is she expects in order to remain married: ““everything!” (96). Without Ralph’s awareness, she has put him on notice, establishing a yet-undecided term for their marital union

and providing the rough outline of how the trajectory of their engagement and marriage will conclude with their divorce and her remarriage.

The pattern of marriage and divorce echoes throughout in the circularity that pervades Susy's social set, which I see as a function of duration and frequency in the narrative. The narrator describes this society as "that squirrel-wheel of a world of his and Susy's you had to keep going or drop out," and "the queer social whirligig from which she had so lately fled" (Wharton 1922, 107, 120). Susy finds herself having "turned and turned about in her agony like a trapped animal in a cramping cage" (118). These metaphors for the unproductive, time-wasting, directionless movement of the leisure-class set echoes the cyclical pattern of the narrative of short-term marriages. Their social set is replete with what Laura K. Johnson calls "short-lived relationships [that] propel them like pinballs through a constantly shifting world. These lost souls circulate autonomously through a culture based on perpetual movement" (2001, 962). Debra Ann MacComb introduces to her consideration of the divorce industry and its abuses the term "rotary marriage," in much the same way that "rotary consumerism" stems from the escalating emphasis on commodity consumption and trading up (traits that Ellie and Undine clearly exhibit). Linking consumption and disposal seen among the leisure class to "advertising schemes" that infiltrate the home and familial relations, MacComb argues that "To her already potent critique of the marriage market, Wharton

adds the role that the booming divorce industry plays by creating a product—marketed in terms of the increased freedom, mobility, and status it can provide—that keeps the marriage economy expanding because spouses and even families become disposable items in the rotary system of consumption” (MacComb 1996, 771). Foundational to this rotary system is the mechanism of divorce and remarriage, suggesting to its participants that divorce and remarriage can advance them in the marriage marketplace by, as MacComb describes it, “recycling women back onto the marriage market after exacting from them both their time and money” (772). (this recycling is reminiscent of Alice Waythorn as the reworn shoe). To further expand the analogy of the squirrel-wheel and whirligig, MacComb argues that “the circle is in fact a spiral requiring ceaseless renegotiations for survival,” suggesting a lack of equivalency in each go-round and a depletion of resources as time passes (781). This metaphor of the spiral rather than a wheel indicates that it isn’t the same thing repeatedly, but something slightly different with each marriage/divorce cycle, in much the same way that Waythorn notes the effect one marriage and the other have on his wife.

The circular pointlessness typified in Wharton's depictions of the American set in New York, Paris, and Venice, for instance, is then echoed in the conclusions of *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *The Custom of the Country*. When Nick and Susy reunite after spending most of the novel apart, there is a sense

that they have spent the span of time learning what should have been obvious to them from the start, that their love and companionship is more valuable than remaining in the pointlessness of rotary consumerism. However, when Undine divorces Raymond de Chelles to remarry her first husband, Elmer Moffatt, it is clear that her acquisitive motivations have not abated. Their remarriage simultaneously suggests the pointlessness of the marital exchanges Undine has made while also encouraging a conservative, normative, perhaps recuperative effort to erase all that has intervened between her marriages to Elmer.

In reference to Susy's proposal, "Why shouldn't they marry; belong to each other openly and honorably, if for ever so short a time, and with the definite understanding that whenever either of them got the chance to do better he or she should be immediately released?" (18-19), the term *better*, which is initially understood only as *wealthier* in financial terms, is reconsidered at the novel's end, so that it can instead be reinterpreted to consider a different value system, one that, in their marital gap, Susy develops by rejecting the consumerism of their social set—and taking on what de Botton suggested about sticking with your spouse. In both novels, the romance plots seem not to end differently than traditional would. The nature of Nick and Susy's limited-term serial marriage experiment, couched in a relationship too modest and moral to spiral through engagement, marriage, and divorce the way Undine Spragg does, becomes both hopeful and conservative, and yet one still considered nearly a century later as a bit too ahead of its time.