Imagine if you will, finding yourself free from a self-imposed prison, living your life in a way and manner that you deem fit. Imagine the joy of being free to do as you will, to wrap yourself in all your desires, and above all being committed to no one. Then imagine one day as you are enjoying your life of freedom, a letter arrives for you, you open it, and your life as you know it comes to a crashing halt. You have just had your freedom revoked; you know it is just a matter of time before you must be forced back into the prison you have tried so long to avoid; this prison of your own making is marriage. This is the basic premise of Edith Wharton’s story “Souls Belated,” the issue of marriage. Lydia Tillotson, married to a rich member of New York upper-class society, has become bored with her domestic life in a mansion in Fifth Avenue and its social privileges like "having a front pew in church and a parterre box at the opera" (55). Lydia decides to turn her back on society and the rule imposed upon her and takes a lover named Gannett; it is from this point that Lydia feels she has regained her freedom as she and Gannett travel throughout Europe. Lydia does not want to marry Gannett and, once again, find herself locked back into her self-imposed prison. She chooses to be with him outside the boundaries of the social norm. Lydia’s ideas differ from those of the women around her, as her marriage to Tillotson is different than her relationship with Gannett.

Lydia does not view marriage as a partnership or as something that is expected of women. Likewise, she does not feel it is an honorable arrangement to find one in: “If she had
never, from the first, regarded her marriage as a full cancelling of her claims upon life, she had at least, for a number of years, accepted it as a provisional compensation, she had made it ‘do’” (55). This implies that marriage is something that is not desirable or something that women should be willing to readily embrace; married women are prisoners within their own marriage as they no longer have their rights or freedom. Lydia’s view of marriage is like placing oneself into a prison that one voluntary walks into. However, Lydia realizes that control of her life is something that is not always within her grasp since you cannot always escape the boundaries of society. For Lydia, the boundary she desperately wants to escape is that of marriage.

Being married to Tillotson had certain advantages; most of all was the high society lifestyle she now became a part of. Being from small town and then marrying into an influential New York family allowed Lydia to experience some of the finer things life had to offer: “It was the kind of society in which, after dinner, the ladies compared the exorbitant charges of their children’s teachers, and agreed that, even with the new duties on French clothes, it was cheaper in the end to get everything from Worth; while the husbands, over their cigars, lamented municipal corruption, and decided that the men to start a reform were those who had no private interests at stake” (55-56). The text implies that as long as women are married, they do not need to be concerned with their freedom as all they have to worry about is their children, the latest fashions, and where to buy their clothing. Men are the ones who have the freedom to do as they please and to discuss those issues outside of the home. In respect to Lydia, all she had to give up was her freedom to be part of the high society lifestyle; at the time this seemed like a good idea. But as time went by, Lydia decided this was not such an even trade. In fact her entire marriage was not an even trade. Tillotson spent most of his time catering to his mother’s every beckoning
wish, while Lydia became bored with the everyday routine of her high society life and the feeling of abandonment from Tillotson; that was before she met Gannett.

Gannett was different from the men Lydia came into contact with during high society soirées; he was a writer, a free spirit, and above all, nothing like Tillotson and the world of high society she so desperately despised. It was being with Gannett that breathed life into Lydia’s dull existence. Just being with him allowed her the freedom to do and to go where she pleased. It also led to one fateful day when she received the thing in the mail, her divorce papers.

Divorce in and of itself is not that big of a deal to Lydia in fact, she expected to receive the divorce papers. The problem that presents itself is Gannett and his noble ideals that they must get married; otherwise, she faces life as an outcast from the high society life that she has become accustomed to. However, Lydia has no intention of subjecting herself to the self-imposed prison of marriage. She states, “You see how the very thought of the thing humiliates me! We are together today because we choose to be - don't let us look any farther than that!” (59). It is here that Lydia implies marriage is something that will only ruin the relationship that she and Gannett have. It also implies that for Lydia, and perhaps all women, that marriage is a humiliating spectacle or circumstance that only demeans and lowers her to a subservient standard. For Lydia, why should they run off to get married? Why can they not just enjoy the time they have together? What of the social norms of the day; who is to say what is right and what is wrong?

Society decides what is right and what is wrong; it is also society that decides the acceptable socials norms. Even as Lydia and Gannett stayed in the Hotel Bellosguardo, they registered as Mr. and Mrs. Gannett: “The mere fact that in a moment or two she must take her place on the hotel register as Mrs. Gannett seemed to weaken the springs of her resistance” (60-61). The implication of the text shows Lydia is not as resistant to the idea of marriage of she
proclaims or, to quote Shakespeare, “Methinks the lady doth protest too much” (Macrone). So for all of Lydia’s protests about being married and wanting to live their life in whatever way they deemed fit, they both confined themselves to the socials norms they both claim to have rejected. Even while staying in the hotel, Lydia cannot seem to break away from the high society lifestyle she came to detest and abhor.

It would seem that no matter where she goes, Lydia cannot escape the lifestyle she claims to no longer want, even thousands of miles away in another country, in a foreign hotel. In fact, Lydia seems to have immersed herself in the culture of the hotel’s high society. Lydia becomes part of the Lady Susan little community of married, rich women who seem to decide how things should be done and with whom they should associate with. For Lydia, it would appear that pretending to be a married woman while living with the high society ladies is what it takes for Lydia to be happy and content, that is until she meets up with Mrs. Cope.

Lydia began to become complacent in her new life with Gannett in the hotel. As far as anyone knew, they were a happily married couple. She did not have to worry about becoming an outcast from the high society that visited, or often lived, in the hotel, and above all she was happy. However, her world soon came to an end when Mrs. Cope sat down beside Lydia to have a conversation with her. Mrs. Cope recognized that Lydia was in the same situation as she, Mrs. Cope, was in. Mrs. Cope was “the other woman” to a Lord Trevenna and like Lydia, she was worried about what society would think of their relationship and the effects it would have on them. Mrs. Cope asks Lydia to speak with her husband, Gannett, about what Lord Trevenna and Gannett were speaking about over the last couple of nights. When Lydia decides not to help Mrs. Cope, she responds, “You're too good to be mixed up in my affairs, are you? Why, you little fool, the first day I laid eyes on you I saw that you and I were both in the same box that's the
reason I spoke to you” (66). The implication from Mrs. Cope’s words are women who involve themselves in affairs or with married men have a mark or look to them that sets them apart from other women. That somehow women, who engage in the sort of activity that Mrs. Cope and Lydia involve themselves in, are tainted in some way that only women, like Mrs. Cope and Lydia, can see and find a kindred or tortured spirit. Lydia discovers the life she has been living with Gannett was nothing more than a lie to appease the high society she claimed she no longer cared about; worse of all, Lydia realized that she lied to herself.

Lydia confronts Gannett about his conversations with Lord Trevenna and her own chat with Mrs. Cope. She tells him, "Do you know why she told me? She had the best of reasons. The first time she laid eyes on me she saw that we were in the same box” (70). The implication of Lydia’s words goes back to Mrs. Cope’s contention that all women involved in affairs instinctively know when another woman is in the same situation as themselves. She knows no matter where they go she can no longer live a lie with Gannett. While living in the hotel and pretending to be married with Gannett was placing herself back into her self-imposed prison, she tells Gannett, "Because I've behaved basely, abominably, since we came here: letting these people believe we were married lying with every breath I drew" (70). The implication here is that Lydia understands she can never be free with any man no matter how happy she may be; society will always demand she be married and, for Lydia, that is not acceptable nor desirable. Lydia begins to understand that her freedom was once again no longer her own. Gannett, for his part, still cannot understand why Lydia refuses to marry him or why they cannot continue to live in the hotel like they have been accustomed, to which Lydia responds:

These people the very prototypes of the bores you took me away from, with the same fenced-in view of life, the same keep-off-the-grass morality, the same little
cautious virtues and the same little frightened vices well, I've clung to them, I've delighted in them, I've done my best to please them. I've toadied Lady Susan, I've gossiped with Miss Pinsent, I've pretended to be shocked with Mrs. Ainger. Respectability! It was the one thing in life that I was sure I didn't care about, and it's grown so precious to me that I've stolen it because I couldn't get it any other way. (70-71)

The implication with Lydia’s words here is that, no matter where she goes, in some small way she wants to be part of high society and accepted by them. She is stating that, one the one hand she cannot bear to be around these people while on the other, she cannot bear not to be part of this society. Lydia decides the best thing for the both of them would be for her to leave Gannett and for her to reclaim her freedom and her life. She tries to explain herself to Gannett: "It's not! I it's our being together that's impossible. I only want you to see that marriage won't help it" (72). The implication here is that no matter how much Lydia enjoys being with Gannett, no matter how much she loves him; she cannot and will not marry Gannett. Lydia decides to board a ship that will take her away from her old life, her marriage, her lover, but will return the freedom that she has so desperately be hoping for. Gannett can only watch from the hotel room window as the boat arrives into the port and Lydia begins to advance toward the ship. Lydia stops, turns, and begins to run back to the hotel. Gannett, hopeful that his dreams of marrying Lydia will come true, begins to look over the railroad charts for the next train to Paris and their impending wedding.

Lydia is scarred from her last marriage and views the whole idea of marriage as a self-imposed prison. To escape from this prison, she takes a lover, Gannett, who is her partner in
crime. She views Marriage as such an evil thing that she is willing to lie to her peers for the sake of avoiding it and to save face.

In Edith Wharton’s “Souls Belated,” Lydia views the concept of marriage as a prison of her own self making. No amount of lovers, travel, social acceptance, or self-denial will convince her to follow the established social norms. Lydia wants to be with Gannett, she wants to have a happy life for herself, and above all she wants to be free. This story helps to demonstrate the inequalities where marriage and relationship are concerned. Had Tillotson or Gannett been the focal point of the story, society would not have cared if they divorced nor had a mistress on the side. Society would have felt that this was acceptable. Lydia states, “It may be necessary that the world should be ruled by conventions but if we believed in them, why did we break through them? And if we don't believe in them, is it honest to take advantage of the protection they afford?” (60). Implying that rules are made to be broken and if one is willing to break them, then do not look back and go forward; on the other hand, if you believe in the rules then, why do you willingly break them in the first place?

Ultimately Lydia decides to fall into the mold society has carved out for her and her gender; women are expected to marry and accept their place in whatever social standing they find themselves in. No woman should have to give up her hopes, her dreams, or her freedom. If Lydia had boarded the ship, she could have reclaimed her life, she could have met up once more with Gannett, and she could have had the freedom she so desperately sought. All Lydia had to was to reconcile her feeling for Gannett, he views on society, and look deep within to find if a life with Gannett was worth giving up her freedom if, giving up her freedom is what she would have been doing. Lydia might have seen a marriage with Gannett as an equal partnership in which she was free do those things she choose without the constant worry about whether he
approved or, if society approved. Lydia might have even been able to convince Gannett that marriage was unnecessary between them. As “Souls Belated” ends, she may or may not marry Gannett however, no matter what she decides, she will always long for her freedom.
Works Cited
