

## Summary and Discussion Questions on *The Fruit of the Tree*

*The Fruit of the Tree* is one of Edith Wharton's few novels to deal directly with issues such as euthanasia, the problems of labor and industrial conditions, and professions for women, as well as Wharton's more customary themes such as divorce. Published in 1907, it received positive but mixed reviews, and more recently critics have attempted to explain its uneven structure, which combines an industrial plot (Amherst's attempts to reform the mills), an ethical plot (the question of euthanasia) and the more conventional romance plot (Justine, Bessy, and Amherst).

As *The Fruit of the Tree* opens, John Amherst, the reform-minded assistant manager at the Hanaford textile mills, meets trained nurse Justine Brent at the hospital bedside of Dillon, an injured mill worker. Justine and Amherst agree Dillon would be better off dead if he is deprived of his occupation, a conversation that unites them in their approval of euthanasia and sets in motion the novel's major incident. Shortly thereafter, Amherst is pressed into showing the mills to the new owner, Bessy Langhope Westmore, a former schoolmate of Justine's who is now a wealthy young widow with a young daughter. During the course of later meetings over the fate of the workers, Bessy falls in love with Amherst, caring less for his beautiful ideas than for his beautiful eyes. Thinking that she shares his idealistic social vision and concern for the workers, Amherst marries her and begins his campaign of reforming the mills. He runs into direct opposition from Bessy's father, Mr. Langhope, and her lawyer, Mr. Tredegar, and indirect opposition from Bessy, since all three prefer to maximize profits at the expense of the millhands. After the death of their infant son, Bessy and Amherst become increasingly estranged, and he spends longer and longer periods absent from home. In the meantime, Justine and Amherst have met and discussed conditions in the mills, and he has come to regard her as a friend.

During one of his absences, which Amherst intends as a tacit separation between the two, Bessy recognizes that Amherst is drifting away from her. Hurt by his indifference, she defies his wishes by going to parties with the disreputable Mrs. Fenton Carbury and indulges herself in planning a “pleasure-house” replete with sun-room, water gardens, and other expensive features. By this time Bessy has also renewed her friendship with Justine, who tacitly understands the situation. Seeing the two drift apart and urged on by Mrs. Ansell, an older friend of Bessy’s, Justine writes to Amherst that he should return home. Hurt by Amherst’s refusal to do so, Bessy rides over icy roads on her spirited horse, Impulse, and suffers a near-fatal spinal injury. Called to Bessy’s side in her capacity of nurse as well as friend, Justine watches Bessy suffer helplessly at the hands of Dr. Wyant, the ambitious young doctor determined to keep his patient alive at all costs. When Wyant leaves the house one afternoon, Justine faces the moral choice of whether to continue Bessy’s suffering or to end it. She recalls Amherst’s seeming approval of euthanasia both in the case of Dillon and in notes that he has written in his books. Moved by Bessy’s plight and comforted by what she is sure will be Amherst’s approval, she administers an overdose of morphine to Bessy.

After Bessy’s death, Justine and Amherst marry, but, as is often the case for Wharton’s characters, their happiness is short-lived. Dr. Wyant, now addicted to morphine, threatens to expose Justine’s action and will no longer be bought off by the small sums that Justine has sent him during the course of her marriage. Pressed into confessing, Justine tells Amherst the truth, and he is initially appalled at her action. Shortly thereafter, she sacrifices her own happiness and leaves Amherst so that his relationship with his former father-in-law, Mr. Langhope, and stepdaughter, Bessy’s daughter Cicely, can continue undisturbed. When Cicely falls ill and pines for Justine, Amherst seeks Justine out and they renew their relationship. Like many of Wharton’s

lovers, however, Amherst and Justine survive this ordeal but scarcely do so unscathed. When he finds a set of plans for Bessy's pleasure-house among her effects, Amherst mistakes them for a new recreation hall for the millworkers and believes Bessy had at last learned to share his compassionate attitude toward the workers in the mill. When he asks Justine about Bessy's motives for building the gymnasium, Justine, who knows the truth, nonetheless lies to preserve his illusions. At the end of the novel, Amherst and Justine look over the wooded slopes of the symbolically named Hopewood. With the specter of the now-idealized Bessy between them, however, Justine and Amherst can never again inhabit the innocent paradise of their first few months together.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. *The Fruit of the Tree* raises a number of ethical issues for discussion.
  - What are the responsibilities of millowners such as Bessy Westmore to those who work for them? Do those responsibilities extend beyond medical care and safe working conditions? Does the kind of community that Amherst envisions represent an admirable level of interest, or is it more a kind of paternalism that keeps workers dependent on the owners for their well-being? Does Amherst go overboard in trying to control the lives of "his" workers?
  - Did Justine do the right thing in administering the morphine to Bessy? Is euthanasia ever justified? If so, under what circumstances?
  - Amherst is supposed to be the hero of the novel, but does he always act heroically? Does he bear any responsibility for the breakup of his marriage and Bessy's subsequent accident?
  - Knowing what she knows about her responsibility for Bessy's death, should Justine have married Amherst? Should she have told him about this before she married him? Did her feelings for Amherst play any part in her decision to give Bessy the morphine?
  - The book describes a number of situations in which characters lie either outright or through omission. Are these (or any lies) justified in light of what follows? For example, did Justine do the right thing in lying to Amherst about Bessy's plans for the pleasure house?
  - To what extent does the novel critique not merely Bessy and her class but the system of industrialism by which she lives?
  - Dr. Wyant blames Justine for the loss of his career. Is he right, or is this statement to be seen as the self-justifying or self-pitying speech of a morphine addict?
  - The book questions medical ethics, suggesting that a doctor's pride in his skill and faith in science may override humanitarian concerns. To what extent is this true in the book? In life?

2. In its look at the position of women in American culture, *The Fruit of the Tree* contrasts two characters, the career woman Justine and the society woman Bessy. Although it favors one over the other, both characters have their flaws. What is the book's view of women's place and roles in American society?
3. Issues of class.
  - This book includes several cross-class relationships, including Amherst's marriage to Bessy and the marriage of Amherst's mother, who was from a prominent family, and his father, a mechanical genius from a lower social sphere.
  - What constitutes "upper" and "lower" class in this book? Does Wharton subscribe to the idea of a natural or innate aristocracy (of intellect, for example)? How are the lower-class families (such as the Dillons) characterized?
4. Divorce is a major theme here, with Mrs. Ansell especially speaking against it. To what extent does the novel endorse or condemn divorce? If Bessy had lived, should she and Amherst have divorced?
5. R. W. B. Lewis has suggested that this would be a much better book if Wharton had focused more intensely on Justine's story. Do you agree? What do the industrial and medical sections add to the book?

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