

Ellen olenska: commodified innocence



In *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton paints an intimate view of New York culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wharton does this by masterfully presenting a slice of New York, focusing on a few intricately developed characters in New York's aristocracy. Of these characters, Newland Archer, through his pursuit of Ellen Olenska, encapsulates everything New York society represents. Through Archer's projection of himself, it is tempting to view him as a heroic rebel, a man above others in his recognition of the superficiality of New York society. However, by critically examining the root of Archer's attraction for Ellen it is clear that he is no different from anyone else in New York. Indeed, Archer's love for Ellen mirrors Marx' concept of commodity fetishism, where Archer values Ellen not for who she is, but for the value that she gives to him. More specifically, Archer falls in love with the identity he finds in Ellen—one where he vicariously lives through her uniqueness, making him feel different from what he views as a superficial New York society. As the story progresses it becomes clear that Archer's commodity fetishism towards Ellen evolves into an obsession, eventually turning what could have been love into nothing more than an objectified relationship. Consequently, Archer's manipulation of Ellen, through his commodity fetishism, pushes the reader to reflect on all the characters of New York society: May Wellend, Mr. Beaufort, Larry Lefferts, and more. By looking at these characters, it becomes clear that all of the people of New York society, like Archer, are superficial and manipulative. This realization, turns the attention of the readers to Ellen, and to the ironic fact that—in contrast to what New York society thinks—it was she that was the innocent one. Not May, nor any other New York character.

Thus, *The Age of Innocence*, describes the momentary place in time, when Ellen Olenska, came to New York.

In the beginning of the story, it is immediately made clear that Archer is somewhat different from New York society. It was Ellen Olenska's arrival to New York that drove Archer to realize the flaws in his society. Indeed, the very fact that Ellen was singled out as an outcast by New York society, made it all the more easy for Archer to fall in love with her. As a result, it is easy for the readers to empathize with this scandalous romance, in full support of Archer's romantic pursuit: " I want – I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that – categories like that – won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter" (213). Indeed, Archer and Ellen seem to be exactly what the readers want: a rebellious couple who truly love each other in a society of superficial relationships and hypocritical rules. However, it is not until the end of the story, when Archer and Ellen meet in the Art Museum, that it becomes clear that Archer was never the the societal hero or lover that he seemed to be.

Perhaps the most noticeable part of this Art Museum scene, is the place that it marks in their relationship. After all, it is here that their unstable relationship begins to buckle. Indeed, the very fact that the whole conversation centers around the two having a " one-night stand," reflects the point to where their relationship has come. For instance, when Ellen—in an attempt to placate the flustered Archer—offers the opportunity " to come to"(266) Archer, the readers see the extent to which Archer's material desire outweighs his love for Ellen. This is seen in Archer's reaction to the offer,

when he thinks only of “ the power she would put in his hands if she consented” (266). Here, Archer shows his ultimately selfish motives. As a result, Archer reveals his commodity fetishism by showing that he cares more about the pleasure he derives from Ellen than from how Ellen feels. It is when Archer’s commodity fetishism is revealed, that their relationship changes. For instance, at the end of the same conversation Archer and Ellen leave looking at each other, not as lovers, but “ almost like enemies” (266). Even though it is Archer who notices this change in their relationship, rather than be worried or disheartened, “ his heart beat with awe” thinking that he had “ never before beheld love visible” (266). It is this very disillusionment of his relationship with Ellen that signals to the readers that Archer has commodified Ellen. Archer shows that he cares more about the emotional capital that Ellen provides him, than Ellen’s own emotions.

Not only does Archer’s commodification of Ellen signal a turn in their relationship, but it also marks an important point in the development of Archer as a character. It is during this conversation, that Archer shows himself to be no different to the very people he sees as superficial and corrupt. For instance, Ellen, wanting to be different than all the other people in New York proposes that she leave New York so as not to “ lie to the people who’ve been good to her [me]” (266). In response, however, Archer argues with Ellen to stay, admitting that his desires are no “ different from his [my] kind” (266). Here, Archer is so disillusioned by his commodified obsession with Ellen, that he fails to see his own hypocrisy, rejecting Ellen’s noble proposition for his own selfish desire, an type of action he would have preciously attributed to the “ hypocrites” of New York such as Larry Lefferts

and Mr. Beaufort. Thus, by revealing his commodity fetishism with Ellen, Archer shows to all that he is no different to those of New York.

Ironically, Ellen Olenska—a woman viewed as an “alien” by New York society—is actually the most human character in the story. Indeed, when all the people around her seem to be concerned with “form” and propriety, yet are committing acts of manipulation, selfishness, and disloyalty, Ellen stands as the complete opposite, caring more about what she believes is right than what is seen as “proper” by the rest of society. Archer’s objectifying treatment of Ellen only proves that he is no different from the others and is a nevertheless a product of his society. Similarly, by looking beneath the exterior, all the other characters prove to be the same. This is seen in Mr. Beaufort’s infidelity, Larry Leffert’s scandals with other women, and even May’s subtle, yet manipulative ploys. All of these characters simply prove that no one in New York is innocent.

Thus, one must beg the question: to what does the title *Age of Innocence* refer? After all, it is clear that May who is seen as the innocent, naive girl, is actually manipulative in her own right. By looking at the irony Wharton has so deeply weaved within the story, I assert that the “innocence” in *The Age of Innocence* represents Ellen Olenska. Here, the word “innocence” is used to represent purity and integrity, all of which describe Ellen. Thus, *The Age of Innocence* represents a moment in New York for what could have been, or perhaps what should have been. Through Ellen Olenska—a woman seen as scandalous, reckless, and “improper” by everyone in society—Edith Wharton depicts a life worth living, reminding the readers that it is not society, but rather the individual that determines who is truly innocent.