

Mythological archetypes of may and ellen in the age of innocence



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Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence* lends itself as a work of social criticism against the tyrannous ideals of Old New York society through the experiences of Newland Archer and his torn love between two women. Wharton's plot, set in the late nineteenth century, depicts the story of a young handsome attorney named Newland Archer who finds himself engaged to the lovely May Welland, yet hopelessly in love with the intellectual Countess Ellen Olenska. Newland's love struggles between May's passionate innocence and Ellen Olenska's engaging intellect. Many times throughout the novel Wharton acknowledges the parallelism of the characters of May and Ellen to Classical mythology. Women at the turn of the nineteenth century were supposed to act according to society's conventions, but Wharton depicts each female character as a Roman or Greek goddess in order to empower May and Ellen in a society where they could never have exercised power otherwise. Throughout *The Age of Innocence* Edith Wharton uses mythological characters as archetypes of May and Ellen to express her views on the repression of women in the late nineteenth century. Edith Wharton uses the Roman Goddess Diana to characterize the attractive May Welland and her own opinion on the repression of women. The Roman goddess Diana, equivalent to the Greek goddess Artemis, is generally known as the goddess of fertility, nature, and childbirth, while Artemis depicts the Greek goddess of the hunt. Wharton's first reference to May's mythological equivalent occurs at the van der Luyden's dinner party with May's entrance in a "dress of white and silver, with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair, [a] tall girl [looking] like a Diana just alight from the chase" (Wharton 42). The color of white characterizes the innocence Newland observes in May while the color silver refers to her association with Artemis, whom Jackson

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refers to as the Maiden of the Silver Bow ("Artemis"). May's dress depicts her discreet innocence, a common archetype of conventional women in the late nineteenth century. May's "Diana-like" (Wharton 123) character allows her to manipulate Newland's love for her by drawing him away from Ellen to a relationship he knows as conventional, safe, and secure. While visiting May in St. Augustine, Newland again notices her immortal nature with her shining "silver wire" hair and a "face [that] wore the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete" (91). Again, May's resemblance to the immortals shows that she "is not truly an empty statue as Newland sees her" (Deter 6) but also embodies the goddess Diana in her hunt for her man, Newland. Deter feels that the most obvious allusion to Diana's athletic abilities as a hunter is May's beautiful display archery (8). She physically embodies Diana's innocent beauty in "her white dress, with a pale green ribbon about her waist and a wreath of ivy on her hat, [having] the same Diana-like aloofness as when she entered the Beaufort ball-room on the night of her engagement" (Wharton 134). May's relation to the color white and her "nymph-like ease" (135) represent her innocent nature yet also her ability to retain athletic qualities to hit her target, Newland. May's "classic grace" (135) causes others to appreciate her unique ability and draws attention to herself in a way that no conventional nineteenth century woman would have done. Here, Newland first begins to realize that May is not as innocent as she seems and merely plays the game of life to suit her fancy. She strictly obeys all rules of society in order to appear innocent against the background of the conventional New York elite. According to Deter, Wharton uses the classical mythological figure of Diana to empower May as a woman existing in her own world, excelling at her own game (9). Later, following the wedding, <https://assignbuster.com/mythological-archetypes-of-may-and-ellen-in-the-age-of-innocence/>

Newland finally realizes May's superior influence and the purpose of her "hunt:" Perhaps that faculty of unawareness was what gave her eyes their transparency, and her face the look of representing a type rather than a person; as if she might have been chosen to pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek goddess. The blood that ran so close to her fair skin might have been a preserving fluid rather than a ravaging element; yet her look of indestructible youthfulness made her seem neither hard nor dull, but only primitive and pure (Wharton 120). May's appearance of immortality challenges Newland's first impression of her innocent life of purity. May obviously holds much more authority over her companions than a traditional woman in Old New York society. Wharton uses the mythological character of May to represent her opinion against the subjugation of women before the turn of the twentieth century. According to Gore Vidal's introduction to *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton, "due to her sex... has been denied her proper place in the near-empty pantheon of American literature" (qtd. in Harold Bloom 4233). Obviously, Wharton's femininity limited the initial success of her life's work and caused her to become more feministic within her novels. Wharton expresses her concern for the repression of women's rights by giving May a mythical goddess to empower her. Ellen's associations with the Greek goddess Aphrodite and the famous Helen of Troy also help develop Wharton's belief on the subjugation of women. Unlike May, Ellen represents an attractive combination of passion and intellect that lures Newland away from his partner of convenience, May. Wharton confirms Ellen's picturesque relationship to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, beauty and sexual rapture. Unlike May, Ellen has recently arrived from a distressing life with her ignorant husband in Poland and is completely unaware of the "intricate and

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tyrannous tribal customs of a highly stratified New York society” (Cutler 65). Her petty attempts at adapting to conventional New York society are unsuccessful, and her constant disobeying of all of society’s rules depicts a more liberal side of women not otherwise seen in the late nineteenth century. Actually, Newland appears tempted by Ellen’s rebellious nature, which he finds quite attractive. While May wears innocent little white dresses, Ellen “ dresses in more provocative styles that depict her sensuality” (Deter 10). When Newland sees Ellen for the first time at the opera she is dressed in a dark blue dress with a “ Josephine-look” that troubles him in her “[carelessness] of the dictates of Taste” (Wharton 7, 10). Ellen’s enticing dress directly portrays the passionate attributes of Aphrodite. Ellen, like Aphrodite, seems to have the unique ability to combine lust and reasoning to attract her lovers. According to Carol Singley, Aphrodite and Ellen come from “ ambiguous origins, both make marriages with unlikely men, and both are identified with roses...” in their association with the color red (qtd. in Deter 10). Like Ellen, Aphrodite was married off at her father’s convenience to someone who couldn’t make her happy. Aphrodite was also quick to punish those who resisted the call of love, much like Ellen’s departure from New York because Newland resisted her love. Many of Ellen’s attributes also relate her to the classic Helen of Troy. Montazzali infers that not only does her name sound like Helen but her “ beauty of Helen is of the spirit, not of the body” (10). Nowlin states that the parallelism between Ellen and Helen of Troy is also implied by numerous references to Faust, a magician of German legend who miraculously conjured up the famous Helen of Troy (5). Ellen’s depiction of the Greek goddess Aphrodite and Helen of Troy emphasizes Wharton’s view on the struggle of women in the late

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nineteenth century. Wharton also makes her opinion evident in the novel when she expresses that “ a woman’s standard of truthfulness [is] tacitly held to be lower: she [is] the subject creature, and versed in the arts of the enslaved” (195). Wharton continues to comment on the plight of women in American society by allowing May and Ellen to become more powerful and more influential than any common nineteenth century woman. By giving her female characters god-like attributes she is essentially empowering all women at that time in history. Within her novel, Edith Wharton deliberately refers to May and Ellen as goddesses because she wants to enable other women to contest their degrading status in American society. Wharton’s work is seen at less than its true worth because of her femininity. Edith Wharton gives May and Ellen mythical characters in order to convey her attitude opposing the repression of women in the late nineteenth century.

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