

Example of essay on the age of innocence analysis

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



The age of innocence refers to a novel by Edith Wharton and got published in 1920. The novel gets set in upper class New York during the 1870s (Wharton 2). In the novel, the author gets to depict the themes of social class, social rigidity and hierarchy that evidenced itself in the elite families of upper New York. Society as portrayed in the novel, forces people to conform to its forms (Pennel 18). The author paints the issue of social classes through the novel's main characters of Newland Archer, May Welland and Ellen Olenska. This paper will aim at analyzing the portrayal of the existent social classes, conformity, gender inequality, and the use of New York City as a character in itself. The paper will also take a look at hypocrisy present in the city.

The novel gets to portray the upper social class that exists in New York at the time. Newland Archer gets presented as coming from a visibly well-to-do New York City family. Ellen who is cousin to May belongs to Mrs. Manson Mingott family, who is considered to be powerful among the upper class New York families (Wharton 56). Welland is also a cultured woman who got brought up by a reputable family and this is evident through her manners. When Archer starts getting disillusioned with Welland, it is because he starts viewing her as a product of her social class. He views her as lacking a sense of self and devoid of personal opinion. The social groups get portrayed through the families of these characters through their social codes (Stone et al 45).

The theme of social conformity also gets viewed through the acts of various characters in the novel. The upper New York society appears to implicate and curtail on how individuals should act or behave. Archer is visibly

desperate to be with Ellen, but he knows that the society would not appreciate of such a move and he thus keeps his relationship with Ellen undercover. when Newland tries to follow Ellen to Europe, May tells him that he is expectant (Wharton 295). This news ties him down automatically as he gets expected to perform his fatherly dues. Ellen's arrival shocks the rigid aristocrats of upper New York through her carefree manners, rumours of adultery and her revealing clothes (Wharton 275). Ellen gets forced by her family against divorcing from her husband as this will bring shame to her family. Her family gets to force Archer to tell her to remain with her husband even though Archer is supportive of her desire for freedom. She even gets cut off financially by both her family and polish husband. Conformity in the New York society also gets portrayed by May. She gets presented as the 'traditional' girl who is dedicated to her husband, and is always trying to impress those around her (Bell 148).

The novel also presents the lack of gender equality among the old upper New York society. Ellen's family becomes opposed to her call to divorce from her husband. Archer is supportive of Ellen's call for personal independence. However, Archer also gets forced to ask her to stay married upon Mingott's family request (Browne 37). Archer meanwhile gets to learn that he loves Ellen. Upon this realization, he pressures May to speed up their wedding date by cutting short on their engagement period. May gets suspicious of this move. Archer moves to allay her suspicion by telling May that he loves her. Later, Archer visits Ellen and confesses to her that he is in love with her (Browne 40). Archer almost immediately receives a telegram from May

indicating of her parents' agreement to prompt the wedding date. This gets to show that the male gender in upper New York at the time got their wishes granted as opposed to their female counterparts.

Through the upper class families and social codes existent in the setting of the novel, New York City almost gets presented as a character (Wharton 210). The established codes and families provide the city with an authority to almost determine how individuals will behave in the environs. Ellen who is back from Europe gets forced out of the city through her rebellious ways and only manages to get back upon the call to aid her ailing grandmother (Wharton 212). The New York world appears to have characteristics of an insular society. The city does not welcome individuals who are opposed to its strict rules of social behaviour and distance. The city also alienates itself with individuals who do not fall under its ascribed social class (Wharton 220).

The author also portrays the apparent hypocrisy present in this society. Even though the society proclaims a high code of behaviour, there are existent flaws in the society, which get ignored. This gets portrayed by the characters of Beaufort and Lefferts. People in the society are well aware of Beaufort's illegal business dealings, but yet cannot confront him (Wharton 264). They keep attending his lavish balls and remain mum as long as his dealings are not displayed to the general public. Lefferts on the other hand is critical of people's moral while he actively engages in extra-marital affairs (Wharton 270).

The novel portrays the values of family or class set rules. Individuals get forced to sacrifice their desire just to appease other members of the social class or family. Archer and Ellen got to sacrifice their undeniable love as the society would not have approved of this. The society expects individuals to maintain marital relationships, thus protecting the tightly knit upper class New York society. May gets to win her battle as the society is supportive of her as she keeps with the set code of conduct. The New York society pretends to maintain a high code of ethics, which is clearly flawed. The society clearly values appearance to reality.

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