

Mortality and immortality



New York Society, in Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence* (1920), is paradoxically immortal and mortal. Like the Olympic pantheon of mythological Greek antiquity, New York Society cavorts and carouses, bickers and condemns while it feasts on ambrosia and canvas-backs. Newland Archer's sister is the gossipy Cassandra; his wife is the huntress Diana. And he, by all instances of the society around him, should be Diana's archer twin: Apollo. He, too, should be "immortal," that is, "like a god", "a deity", "never aging", "perfect", "alive although dead", "icy", "condemning" and "aloof." Surprisingly for Newland and the expectations of his society, after meeting Ellen Olenska he recognizes through the contrast between her and New York that he, like her, is different from the others in New York's pantheon. He, too, is "mortal," that is, "human", "aging", "imperfect", "feeling", "compassionate" and "warm". Once Catherine, the great matriarch of the pantheon, is able to fall from immortality and become a mortal, there is a possibility for Archer to leave the pantheon and live a mortal existence himself. But despite his realization of this possibility, Newland never leaves the pantheon to take on a mortal existence. His inability to freely act on his desires casts the "icy perfection" of immortality in a new light: immortality becomes a form of paralysis. He, ironically, is trapped in his immortality like a soul in a statue. Through the dichotomous metaphor of immortality and mortality, Wharton is able to cast New York and her hero (or perhaps, more precisely, anti-hero) Newland Archer as paradoxically "god-like" yet paralyzed. When Wharton first describes the characters of New York society, they are always conceived of as immortal in some way. Beginning with Catherine Mingott, her "immense accretion of flesh" rewarded her by "presenting to her mirror an almost unwrinkled

expanse of firm pink and white flesh.” So, Catherine, despite her very old age, manages to escape wrinkles. She is not alone in escape aging, a sign of her immortality. For example, Mrs. van der Luyden’s “ portrait by Huntington” is still “ a perfect likeness though twenty years had elapsed since its execution.” Wharton further emphasizes this point: “ Indeed, Mrs. Van der Luyden . . . might have been the twin sister of the fair and still youngish woman drooping against a gilt armchair [in the painting] . . .” In fact, Mrs. van der Luyden’s youth is so eerie that, “ She always, indeed, struck Newland Archer as having been rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death.” Her husband, Mr. van der Luyden, also has the same quality of being alive but dead. His home is like a place for the living dead: “ As Archer rang the bell, the long tinker seemed to echo through a mausoleum; and the surprise of the butler who at length responded to the call was as great as though he had been summoned from his final sleep.” Indeed, van der Luyden’s home always, “ looms up grimly, even in the summer.” In his grim state of being alive but dead he is a sort of immortal. His immortality is made even clearer when, later, Mr. van der Luyden is described as Ellen’s “ protecting deity.” Everything about this ruling family of New York society seems to insist upon their life-in-death nature, or their immortality. Another member of the pantheon, May Welland, is also described as an immortal. When she first enters the Beaufort’s ballroom, “ in her dress of white and silver with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair, she looked like a Diana just alighting from the chase.” When Newland visits May in St. Augustine, May, “ walks beside Archer with her long swinging gait; her face wears the vacant serenity of a young marble

athlete.” In both instances, May is described as an immortal, something beyond human. She is described as being “superhuman” in Newland’s mind for pledging to give him up if he truly loves someone else. Newland later tries to understand what makes her seem so immortal. He guesses that “perhaps the faculty of unawareness was what gave her 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.” May is, in some sense, the most immortal of the immortals, since even on her honeymoon she is as icy and frozen as ever: “She looked handsomer and more Diana-like than ever. The inner glow of happiness shined through like a light under ice.” Later, when May suggests that Ellen would be happier with her husband than in New York, Newland condemns her suggestion saying, “Watching the contortions of the damned is supposed to be a favorite sport of the angels; but I believe even they don’t think people happier in hell.” Here he suggests that May is like an angel watching Ellen suffer. The archery tournament is the most vivid example of May’s godliness. When she comes out of the tent to the tournament, “She has the same Diana-like aloofness as when she had entered the Beaufort ballroom on the night of her engagement.” Her “nymph-like ease” makes her stand out from the other participants. Also, she, like Mrs. van der Luyden is able to defy the aging process: “In the interval not a thought seemed to have passed behind her eyes or a feeling through her heart; and though her husband knew that she had the capacity for both he marveled afresh at the way in which experience dropped away from her.” As another attribute of her godliness, May never shows pain; her only wounds are imaginary: “[Archer thinks] if May had spoken out her grievances (he suspected her of many) he might have laughed them away; but she was

trained to conceal imaginary wounds under a Spartan smile.” May is always young; she is always innocent and without visible pain. As final testimony to her ability to defy age, she dies quickly and mysteriously of pneumonia after she weans her second child. Ellen’s mortality stands out in stark contrast to May’s immortality. Ellen ages, cries and feels. Early in the novel, “ It was generally agreed that Ellen had lost her looks.” Even Archer agrees that her “ early radiance is gone. The red cheeks have paled; she is thin, worn, a little older-looking than her age, which must have been nearly thirty.” Her mortality is emphasized by the fact that she ages; and it is made even more apparent when compared to the cast of gods who never age. Further, Ellen is the only character (besides Newland) who cries . Her first sadness is revealed when she explains to Newland her frustration of “ the real loneliness,” which is “ living among all these kind people who ask one to pretend.” Her humanism and sympathy for others is also quite exceptional in her society of gods. Ned Winsett points out that Ellen bandaged and rescued his little boy: “ My little boy fell down chasing his kitten, and gave himself a nasty cut. She rushed in bareheaded, carrying him in her arms, with his knee all beautifully bandaged, and was so sympathetic and beautiful that my wife was too dazzled to ask her name.” Ned, a mortal, is the first to recognize Ellen’s beauty. No one among the pantheon recognizes her beauty except Newland , of course, and Catherine after her stroke. Ellen’s aging, sympathy and humanism cast her as a mortal against the backdrop of immortal New York. Catherine is the only one among the gods of New York that seems to “ fall” from immortality. In the beginning of the novel, she seems as immortal as the rest with her vast flesh keeping her skin smooth and pink and wrinkle-free, despite her old age. As if conscious of her position in the pantheon,

Catherine has a grand mural of the Olympiad painted on her summer home. She also speaks like a god, condemning Ellen to her fate: “‘ And now it’s too late; her life is finished.’ She spoke with the cold-blooded complacency of the aged throwing earth into the grave of young hopes.” Her ability to judge, condemn and bury alive is seen in her treatment of Ellen and then later Mrs. Beaufort. But soon after her abandonment of Mrs. Beaufort, Catherine suffers a stroke. Unlike Mr. Welland whose sickness is a sham induced to protect the reputation of his bad doctor, Catherine is the first character in the novel to really become ill and almost die; in this sense, she is the first of the “immortals” to fall from godliness. Her body, which once never aged, now shows physical signs of deterioration. She “ looked paler with darker shadows in the folds and recesses of her obesity.” Also, her temperament has changed from being the cold, callous goddess to a more understanding “mortal” woman. Wharton describes the change in Catherine: “ The growing remoteness of old age, though it had not diminished her curiosity about her neighbors, had blunted her never very lively compassion for their troubles; but, for the first time, she became absorbed in her own symptoms and began to take a sentimental interest in certain members of her family to whom she had hitherto been contemptuously indifferent.” After her change, Catherine’s first impulse is to bring Ellen back home. Her focus has changed from purely “ godly” concerns to human concerns. Although previously she had been the first to condemn her, to cut her off from her allowance when she refused to divorce, she suddenly identifies and sympathizes with Ellen’s plight. Something has changed in Catherine; she is now mortal. She invites Archer to her home, specifically denying May the invitation. Archer tells Catherine that she is handsome, but Catherine immediately uses the

complement as a segue to champion her granddaughter. She says, “ Ah, but not as handsome as Ellen.” She is the first of the gods of New York Society to see beauty in Ellen. She also resolutely decides that Ellen must stay with her and receive her allowance: “ The minute I laid eyes on her, I said: {You sweet bird, you! Shut you up in that cage again? Never!” A clearer indication of this change in her mortality is her own recognition of the change. Catherine says, “ She hadn’t been here five minutes before I’d have gone down on my knees to keep her if only, for the last twenty years, I’d been able to see where the floor was!” This statement is highly ironic because, of course, literally she has not been able to see the floor because of her extreme obesity. But on another level, she admits to being off the floor, not leveled in reality, on the ground and in a mortal existence. Through Catherine we realize that it is possible for someone to relinquish his place among the gods and choose a mortal existence. Despite the fact that Newland recognizes the possibility to shift from an immortal existence to a mortal existence, he remains in the pantheon. In the pantheon, Newland plays the role of Apollo. In Greek mythology Diana (called Artemis by the Greeks) and Apollo are the “ archer” pair. Artemis and Apollo are the great twin archers in mythology; May makes clear, particularly to Ellen that she and Newland are “ the same in all feelings” cementing the analogy between the mythological archers and the New York Archers. Janey, Newland’s sister, is referred to as “ Cassandra-like.” In Greek mythology, Cassandra is the gossipy lover of Apollo, thus, once again securing the analogy between Newland and Apollo. Apart from the godlike similarities , Newland also behaves as an immortal in other ways. For example, he, like the van der Luydens, often senses that he is alive but dead. In conversation with May, he thinks to himself, “ I’ve caught my death

already! I am dead. I've been dead for months and months." In another scene, Wharton describes Newland as "absent from life," as though he were dead. By being godlike like May and simultaneously alive-in-death like the van der Luydens, Archer is an immortal and fits in well in New York's pantheon. Despite his "immortal" characteristics, his mortality is starkly visible, particularly when he visits Ellen. Early on, Newland sees evidence of his mortality first in the literature that he reads. He first begins to feel trapped in his role when May and Mrs. Welland insist he go from family to family announcing his engagement. He feels like he is a "wild animal cunningly trapped". He supposes that his readings from anthropology are forcing him to take such a coarse view. Further evidence of his mortality is in his agreement with Ellen. On their first meeting in her home, she tries to explain away the van der Luyden's place in the pantheon. She suggests that they remain powerful and exclusive because they "receive so seldomly"; thus, she debases their immortality. Newland, "laughed and sacrificed them." Newland is able, like Catherine, to become mortal and sacrifice his gods. But, he lacks the boldness to do it outside of Ellen's company. With Ellen he is able to view New York "as through the wrong end of a telescope." But once he steps outside her company, "New York once again becomes vast and imminent and May the loveliest woman in it." Newland's mortality is addressed more directly by the Marchioness Manson: in jest, she says while referring to Dr. Carver, "How merciless he is to us weak mortals, Mr. Archer!" Although the expression is clearly just humor, there is also the question of Archer's mortality that is distinctly articulated. Not only does Newland recognize his mortality in the conversations he has with others, but he also sees it reflected in his studies of relics and of future inventions.

Through a comparison with his readings, Newland comes to understand his society as a “hieroglyphic world”. Hieroglyphs are obscure symbols, but they are also very ancient. In this comparison, Newland shows an understanding that all the codes of his “modern society” will someday be as obscure and meaningless as hieroglyphs. He compares the simulated reluctance of May’s acceptance of the engagement as similar to “the books of Primitive Man that people of advanced culture were beginning to read, where the savage bride is dragged with shrieks from her parent’s tent.” In comparing the rituals of the “immortal society” in which he lives with the barbaric and ancient traditions of the past, he understands that his society, too, will one day be gone. This acceptance is extremely “mortal”; the recognition of the near possible end to his pantheon shows that he is, at heart, not an immortal. The final meeting between Ellen and Newland in the museum highlights this sense of impending mortality that Ellen and Newland share but that the other immortals can not seem to grasp. Newland and Ellen begin their final conversation while staring at a relic from a society that may once have been as powerful and “immortal” as New York society. Ellen says, “After a while nothing matters (any more than these little things that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labeled: ‘Use unknown.’” Ellen and Newland both realize that all the rules and regulations that have forbidden their happiness will soon become relics just like the museum exhibit. In an earlier scene, the same sense of mortality is found by looking into the future rather than the past. Ellen and Newland speak lightly about the future of the telephone and the fantastic predictions of Jules Verne and Edgar Poe. They speak of the future and speak of the past, placing themselves in a transient

age, and naming themselves as mortals that are born, grow old and die. Although he clearly possesses the characteristics of the mortals and immortals, Newland is unable to “fall from immortality” as Catherine did; he is unable to vocally champion and publicly love Ellen as Catherine is able to. Unlike Catherine, Newland never chooses to act against the rules of the immortal society. Instead he lives a life of pretend, upholding the rules of “immortals” while suffering as a mortal. His life of façade is so convincing that people begin to call him “a good citizen”. He allows his true love, the only other mortal who had been included in the pantheon, to live alone, exiled. Meanwhile, his lack of boldness makes him “miss the flower of life,” the freedom that he, ironically, had always pictured himself as possessing. He can never freely choose the life he wishes to live. And, in this sense, his “immortal” life is more paralyzing than liberating. Ironically, it is the mortals who are free to live where they want to live and be who they want to be. The juxtaposition of mortality and immortality in *Age of Innocence* is the most informative tool that Wharton could have used to relate the true nature of the last pantheon in American history. Newland, in his struggle to confront his own mortality and then in his cowardice to deny it, is the most befitting narrator for a tale of such a society. He is simultaneously in the circle of gods, while also a mortal, rejecting and criticizing the lives that the others lead. His decision not to cheat on May and not to abandon his unborn child is simultaneously a tribute to his understanding of immortality and mortality. He stays with her, partially because he is sheltered, protected and empowered by the pantheon. At the same time, he and Ellen agree that a life of infidelity would make him “just like the others.” A life of cavorting and carousing, like that of Larry Lefferts, would be a life of the cold “immortals.”

So, in his decision to be forever faithful, his life is a tribute to the compassion of human mortality. In this sense, Wharton leaves the question of whether Newland is a mortal or an immortal open. He never seems to grow old, or age just as the immortals. At the same time, his compassion and fidelity are so unlike the characteristics of the others that he seems entirely distinct from them. Perhaps Wharton places Newland in the paradox position between mortality and immortality intentionally. After all, Newland, in his position of flux, has the gift of an insider perspective while maintaining a critical eye. Simultaneously, he lacks the power to change and reconstruct his society in order to allow us, readers, to observe his entrapment in the marble mausoleum of New York society.