

# Deviation from social code: analysis of characters and theme of the age of innoce...

[Literature](#), [Character](#)



Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920) is a detailed depiction of social conventions and decorum of the high society of New York during the late 19th century. One of the central themes of the novel is the struggle of an individual inside a rigid society. Order, loyalty, tradition and duty are the values upheld by the society where Newland Archer grew up. He is a lawyer, engaged to be married to May Welland, raised to be a perfect wife and mother according to society's standards (Wharton, 1998).

These same rules and standards dictate that she pretends to be ignorant of her fiancé's feelings toward Countess Ellen Olenska. For a long time, Newland and Ellen had to sacrifice their desires and feelings in order to maintain order in society. Society in *The Age of Innocence* shapes and directs the life of an individual, sacrificing what they truly want and truly believe in. Society's forms and conventions decide how one should think and behave. Society's primary agent of its laws is the family, specifically the old money families belonging to the high society New York.

These are the families with inherited wealth which separates them from the lower class. Their wealth is an important dimension in stratification because it ensures the financial stability of the future generation of the family. Their "old money" allows them a luxurious lifestyle without having the need to work. The greatest manifestation of the importance of order is seen in family. It is the foremost duty of the individual to promote and protect the harmony of his/her blood and marital relationships.

The family disapproved Ellen's decision to divorce his husband despite his being abusive and cruel to her. For them, it was just natural to endure little

sacrifices to maintain the family. By going against their principles, she became an outcast; someone who is pitiful. At first, Newland was hesitant to be associated with Ellen. She has a bad reputation and he wanted nothing to do with her. However, the family expected him to help bring Ellen out in the public so he was forced to enter the Mingott's opera box and introduce himself.

And of course eventually, they hide their true feelings in fear of hurting their family. Following this duty to the family and society, a code of morality dictates the actions and thinking of the individual in whatever aspect of his/her life. May informed Newland of her passion by letting him guess that she "cares" for him as this is the only way a love of a young unmarried woman should be declared. She must conform to society's perfect portrayal of a young maiden? sexually innocent and ignorant on matters about affairs and passion (Barker-Benfield, 2000).

She was first seen with white lilies in the valley, unaware of sexual implications of the scenes in the play she is watching. Later in the book, it was established that from the start she was aware of Newland's feelings towards the Countess but she chose to remain silent and follow the code of ignorance. Despite this knowledge, her wedding at Grace Church must continue to maintain the order on how things should be done. Newland has his own list of socially mandated duties according to Lawrence Lefferts and Sillerton Jackson, expert on manners and expert on family matters, respectively.

Order in society is maintained through these rarefied practices to continue the continued existence of the civilization. The social code is strictly enforced by society which compromises the personal freedom of the individual (Charles, Davies & Harris, 2008). Sometimes a family member has to let go of his/her personal wants and follow the decision of the family to avoid economic and political sanctions. Newland and Ellen could not pursue each other in order to maintain their social integrity. Even a simple walk together cannot be done without arousing suspicion.

To be divorced to a husband is frowned by society eventhough that husband treats you badly, go out with other women even men. Her family wanted her to seek reconciliation with her husband in order to reaffirm the values of society. When she refused to do so, they cut off her allowance as a consequence for her decision. In the end, Ellen chose to maintain her individuality by leaving America, a price she had to pay. She was forced out of New York, condemned by her own family, who believed that she and Newland are having a secret affair.

Newland defended the right of Ellen to be with another man: " 'I'm sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots... Women ought to be free - as free as we are,' he declared, making a discovery of which he was too irritated to measure the terrific consequences. " (Wharton, Book One, Chapter 5, p. 35) He condemned the double-standard prevalent in the society where a man can seek sexual pleasures outside a failed marriage but the woman cannot.

He may have progressive views but he was unaware of their implications in his own very traditional marriage. But these codes exist not without loopholes. Those who found these loopholes are often despised but still accepted in the society. Hypocrisy is common and rampant in Old New York high society. Families attend balls and gatherings hosted by the same person they contempt for being so common who they would gladly exile following the collapse of his business. Lawrence Lefferts claims to be an expert in Christian virtues while snubbing Ellen for being a divorcee.

Newland is aware that if he leaves May for Ellen, society's sympathy will pour for May. She told Ellen of her pregnancy despite being unsure of it to drive her away from Newland. She was aware of Newland's passion for Ellen but did not say anything. This society, with its rigid rules and conventions, was challenged by the arrival of a new society symbolized by the Beauforts and Countess Ellen Olenska. Though they were not successful in blending and harmonizing with the old society's tradition, they opened new possibilities of otherwise closed-minded individuals.

Towards the end of the novel, it became clear that a new order has taken over with fresh ideas and movements. They began to consider and attribute importance to different things such as interesting and artistic people. There was an obvious change of attitude to people like the Beauforts. Beaufort's illegitimate daughter, Fanny, and her marriage with Dallas Archer were not objected by society. In fact they were fond of her bright personality. Society did not post any obstacle to Newland and Ellen being together but Newland was so stuck in the past that he failed to recognize that time has changed.