

Conflict between the individual and society as depicted in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*



One of the main themes that is recurrent throughout Edith Wharton's work *The Age of Innocence* is the ongoing struggle between the individual and society. This is an issue that Wharton was quite concerned with in the novel, and it is reflected in the characters in the book. The story is a window into the era in which she wrote, and we can see that the situations and dilemmas faced by the main characters are largely centered around this conflict. Any attempt to understand the conflicts in the novel in the context of the larger society in which they transpire must begin with a consideration of the main characters and their motivations. May Welland Archer is a product of the social code and hierarchy in which she was raised. We can see that her choices and actions are often based upon what she thinks that other people will think. Throughout the course of the novel she gradually morphs into a near mirror image of her mother. She becomes increasingly controlling of those around her, particularly Newland. Her trickery with regards to the pregnancy ruse speaks to how far she has come in attaining and maintaining control. Ultimately, while she cannot offer Newland what he seeks in a relationship, she ironically represents what can be said to be the prototypical ideal of the model wife of the period. In a manner similar to May, Newland also seeks to keep in line with the social graces and expectations of the era. Despite the fact that he has inclinations to seek out other women, Countess Ellen Olenska really represents a dream that can never be, as Newland will never follow through with an action that runs counter to social convention. While he feels the heavy burden of duty and responsibility that society bears upon him, he cannot seem to throw this weight from his shoulders. It is also unclear if he really wants to do so. This is something that May uses to her benefit in dealing with and controlling Newland. She knows deep down that

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she can utilize Newland's personal need to keep within social expectations to further her controlling grip over his life and their relationship. While he feels the longing for another life or at least fulfilling his desires with Ellen, his overriding need to keep to his duty and social responsibility preclude this from being a viable option. Countess Ellen Olenska represents all that is different from the structured and stratified society that the other characters find themselves in. She comes from Europe and brings with her an unconventional style that symbolizes a sort of freedom that seems quite elusive to many of the other characters such as Newland Archer. Unlike many characters, she seems to act with far less deference to what others may deem correct or acceptable behavior. We can see the conflict between what the characters wish for and what they must settle for in response to societal expectations. Newland Archer wishes desperately to be with Ellen, yet society will simply not abide by such an eventuality. When Newland finally decides to travel after Ellen to Europe, May reveals that she is pregnant, quashing his dreams and effectively sealing his fate. Ultimately, he cannot gather the necessary will to defy the mores of his society. Similarly, Ellen harbors wishes and desires of her own as well. She wants to divorce her husband and be free to experience her own life, but Archer persuades her that she will hurt her family and be looked down upon by society. Her family even calls on her to go back to the husband who treated her poorly in order to uphold societal expectations and protect appearances. They even cut off her allowance in an attempt to reign her in when she refuses to give in to their demands. After giving her best effort at remaking herself to fit into New York society, she realizes it is not to be and returns to Europe. Yet, she does not return to her husband as might be expected. Her final loss is realized

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when May announces to her that she is pregnant with child. Societal expectations dictate that a man absolutely must stay with his pregnant wife. It is wholly unacceptable for him to do anything less in light of the overriding societal pressures of the day, and both May and Ellen know this. Ironically, it is Newland who stresses to Ellen the importance of denying her own desires and wishes to be with him for other considerations such as societal expectations and the impact upon those around them. It must be noted that Newland does not believe that this is necessarily the best course of action, but perhaps it is really the only option available to them. She clearly puts great weight in his words as she feels it is a nobler and more unselfish way of living than she has experienced in the past. Newland feels that "it was less trouble to conform with the tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives than to try to put into practice the theories with which his untrammelled bachelorhood had dallied... Whatever happened, he knew she would always be loyal, gallant, and unresentful; and that pledged him to the practice of the same virtues" (Wharton, p. 196-97). As the novel progresses it becomes clear that their love can never be. Ellen states that she knows there is really nowhere for them to go to be happy together as they will never succeed in truly freeing themselves from the constraints of society. "'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.'" She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. 'Oh, my dear - where is that country? Have you ever been there? . . . I know so many who've tried to find it (Wharton, 230) Another theme that runs throughout the novel and is closely tied to the notion of the

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conflict between society and the individual is that of appearance vs. reality. Many of the novel's characters are actually more concerned with what people think about them and how they are perceived by others than in experiencing personal happiness. Ellen sees through much of this façade upon her visit to New York. She sees the hypocrisy inherent in the people around her and even informs Newland that the people just refuse to or do not want to acknowledge it. This conflict or disparity between how things appear and how they actually are in reality permeates the novel. It can be seen in the way that women are expected to overlook their husband's affairs (so long as they are discreet for appearance sake), and in the fact that all of society turns out for the Beaufort Ball despite the fact that he is talked about poorly behind his back. This also is seen in the elaborate send-off given to Ellen, despite the undercurrent of hostility just beneath the surface. This party to say goodbye is also a societal expectation that has more to do with appearances than reality. " There were certain things that had to be done, and if done at all, done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these in the old New York code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe" (Wharton p. 285)It is telling that the characters have something of a love/hate relationship with the structured society in which they live. In fact, Wharton herself uses the novel to critique the social code, while still not really branding it as absent of value. While she acknowledges that there are certainly issues with the way things were, the moral code of society is not without a certain measure of importance. This is because it is through these social mores and norms that society is able to pass down traditional values and cultural history. In truth, her work is an examination of the inherent tensions present in the conflict between

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personal happiness on the one hand and societal pressures and expectations on the other. The main characters of the novel try to find a middle ground but ultimately conclude that their society is filled with absolutes and they ultimately resign themselves to the way things are.