

A struggle with society



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“ It’s worth everything, isn’t it, to keep one’s intellectual liberty, not to enslave one’s powers of appreciation, one’s critical independence?” (164). Questioning the concepts of true freedom and liberty, the overall theme presented throughout Edith Wharton’s masterful novel, *The Age of Innocence*, is the abstraction of individualism. Narrated in the third-person omniscient point-of-view, this novel discusses old New York’s reactions to scandal and contrasts traditional ideas with those that their society denounces. Set in late eighteenth-century New York, the protagonist Newland Archer is torn between duty and passion when the mysterious Countess Olenska arrives. Trapped between two women with completely contradictory sets of ideals, Archer does not know whether to commit himself to the woman who lives for honor and decency or to accept the woman who understands his opposition towards society’s cruelty. The novel is “ typically read as a discussion of the conflict between the individual and society,” as Archer struggles with abiding by society’s rules and fulfilling his colleagues’ expectations (Hynes).

One of the most significant conflicts present is the antithesis between the safety of conformity and tradition and the excitement and danger that come from deviating from the social criterion. Within the first few chapters of the book, society’s recognition for conformity is evident. In the beginning, every character is undoubtedly a victim of “ a society that refuses to discuss any of the unpleasant facts of life, such as divorce, extramarital affairs among its members, or the possibility of marriages made for financial gain” (Hynes). None of the characters seem to question or doubt their ideals, even proving that they are willing to compromise their morality to maintain their

reputation. Wharton illustrates that the social standards placed on the people of old New York essentially determine their lives and that “ this complex set of prescriptions and prohibitions is...binding” (Evron). Their unattainable expectations and the social pressure they experience prevent them from expressing their opinions or demonstrating any form of individualism.

Placing great value and importance on the social class system and hierarchy, the upper class families are regarded as the leaders of society. Wharton makes this idea lucid by listing the families that “ most people imagined...to be the very apex of the [social] pyramid...” (42). Two of the most distinguished members of their society introduced are the van der Luydens. Recognized for their lavish parties, this affluent couple determines whether or not someone is to be accepted into the upper class. Requesting that people receive their approval of status before essentially becoming a “ somebody” in society demonstrates old New York’s exclusive nature. Believing that “ there’ll be no such thing as Society left” if the upper class doesn’t stand together, they receive only those eminent enough to convene popular parties (43). By capitalizing “ society,” Wharton demonstrates the amount of emphasis and importance the citizens place on society. Anybody beyond the social circles is considered inferior and is therefore neglected.

Along with the van der Luydens, Mrs. Manson Mingott, a woman physically isolated from society due to her weight, also represents the importance of appearance and reputation. “ Her visitors [are] startled and fascinated” by the arrangement of her house, which recalls “ architectural incentives to immorality such as the simple American had never dreamed of” (25).

Physical extravagance is essential to their society because it represents wealth and significance, often displaying that the person is a member of the elite. Wharton creates these characters to provide readers with a setting that clearly conflicts with the main character's beliefs. " This lost world, lavish with particulars of dress, food, wine, manners, is weighted with an abundance of reality, all the furnishings of excessively indulged, overly secure lives" (Howard). Whether or not their citizens exhibit unique personality traits is of no importance to them as long as everyone adheres to societal standards and participates in their colleagues' ridiculous attempts to prove their worth.

Being one of the most notable motifs in the novel, money plays an essential role in the characters' lives, as they are each entitled by their amount of wealth. " Wharton incorporates a tale of money, which at the bottom is what made the whole system of that endowed society work" (Howard). Many of the characters' lives revolve around money and the acquisition of wealth. Wharton's characters are consumed by their obsession with money, illustrating her intent of depicting old New York as a commercial society. The Beauforts, a family considered to be common, regularly hold balls to earn a respectable reputation and to reserve their place in society. When Julius Beaufort's business dealings collapse and the family is no longer wealthy or honorable, everyone decides that " society must manage to get on without the Beauforts" (226). Demonstrating old New York's hypocrisy and obsession with financial status, those who lose their wealth are shunned from society and ignored. Ned Winsett, a poor and failed author who marries an invalid, is not considered to be a constituent of their society because of his insufficient

amount of wealth and style. Winsett's character represents the disparate form of confinement that the lower class must endure. Although he does not possess any status and is virtually unaffected by societal expectations, he is still constrained financially. This illustrates that no one in Old New York can escape the feeling of confinement.

Because establishing and maintaining a reputation is so critical to the people of old New York, their "society insists upon the absolute innocence, purity, and ignorance of all sexual matters in its unmarried woman" (Hynes).

Newland Archer's sister, Janey, is a prime example of the outcome of their traditional views of women. Adopting a childish nature, she represents the unmarried women who are perpetually forced into blind obedience and submission. Still living together with her mother "in mutually dependent intimacy [that] had given them the same vocabulary," Janey continuously makes decisions based on her mother's approval (30-31). She has adapted to the belief that women are inferior to men and must not engage in the affairs of men. Wharton expresses her discontent and criticism of society's traditional gender roles by depicting "both society and landscape in unmistakably feminine terms" and realizing Archer, the "American hero, as the opposite of the feminine," thus causing the novel to become "exclusively male" (Hadley). Because the main character is a male, she exposes the popular notion that central characters must have elements of masculinity. Wharton poses her questions about certain gender-based expectations through Archer's character when he is the first to dispute the denial of certain rights and freedoms for women. When discussing the Countess Olenska's decisions, he exclaims that no one has "the right to

make her life over” is she hasn’t and that he is “ sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots...” (36). Stating that “ women ought to be free” as men are, Archer defends the Countess and women in general (36). While criticizing men’s double standard, he demonstrates his support for gender equality. In the novel, this is the first sign of his conflicted nature and deviance from the popular opinion.

Throughout the novel, Newland Archer is extremely disapproving of the type of people his community breeds and the ideas planted in their minds at birth. However, in the very beginning “ few things seemed to [him]...more awful than offense against ‘ Taste,’ that far-off divinity of whom ‘ Form’ was the mere visible representative and vicegerent” (14). Readers notice that Archer too supports the widespread belief that anyone with an appearance inconsistent with those in New York lacks modesty. His initial opinion of Ellen Olenska is homogenous with those around him, as he is equally repulsed by her disregard for manners. Wharton creates Archer to be another example of a product of their society, but he questions everything he has lived for when he is faced with the unfamiliar. Archer continuously feels constrained by his marriage to May Welland and his mother’s expectations. He immediately becomes associated with the Mingott family and their decisions when he enters their family’s box at the theater “ without a word” (16). He is initially very eager and content with leading a conventional and stable life with May. “ Archer’s softness, an outcome of his sheltered life...is such a fundamental property of his nature that even his fugitive flashes of insight into...the brutal practices of inclusion and exclusion that underlie his social reality do not

seem harden him or turn him into a cynic" (Evron). He experiences extreme internal conflict because he does not possess the courage to revolt against the people he has known his entire life and the ideas he has always advocated.

After several glimpses of freedom from social oppression that the Countess Olenska grants to him, Archer finally realizes the confinement he feels. The 'haunting horror of doing the same thing every day at the same hour besieged his brain...the word ['sameness' ran] through his head like a persecuting tune" (70-71). The effects of her eccentric personality have begun to affect his opinions of May. He not only feels limited by his marriage but also when he is denied the power to object to a family decision and is left in a state of ignorance of the situation. This adds another element of suffocation to his already confined life. However, it is evident that his narrowness of vision prevents him from acting drastically upon his frustration and that "his psychological constitution simply does not have the necessary reserves to sustain a lasting opposition to his social environment" (Evron). Readers witness his shifts in attitude as the novel progresses, but due to the way he has been raised, he does not undergo a complete transformation. He is constricted to the ways of old New York because of his past and that piece of him continues to haunt him in the present.

Written to be the most habitual character in the novel, May Welland veritably proves to be one of Wharton's most interesting characters. Initially engaged and then married to Newland Archer, her character essentially symbolizes all that Archer desires to escape. Along with Janey, she represents the ideal type of woman their society praises and values. Although she is "

straightforward, loyal and brave” and has “ a sense of humor,” Archer believes that untrained human nature [is] not frank and innocent” and is “ full of twists and defenses of an instinctive guile” (39). Archer begins to doubt his decision of marrying May to ensure himself of a safe future because he believes her conventionality may serve as a façade. Her passiveness and incapability of voicing her opinion proves to be the element that leads to Archer’s discontentment. Wharton utilizes her as Archer’s foil because her “ incapacity to recognize change [in Archer] leaves her oblivious to the fact that all around her the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself” (Evron). Constantly “ making the answers that instinct and tradition taught her to make,” she is sheltered from reality (70). This causes Archer to feel that life is dull and uneventful with May. In his future, he sees “ the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen” (185). Wharton’s criticism of passiveness is depicted through Archer’s constant disapproval of his wife’s innocence. He does not want May to have “ that kind of innocence- the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience” (120). He associates her naiveté and inability to stand up for herself with conformity and ignorance. He believes that “ perhaps that faculty of unawareness [is] what [gives]...her face the look of representing a type rather than a person” (154). In this passage, Archer describes May’s physical appearance, viewing her as a representation of their society rather than an opinionated individual. Later, May catches her skirt in the step of a carriage and damages her wedding dress, a symbol of their marriage and love. This accident symbolizes the end of their infatuation with each other, and because their relationship is broken, the dress is now destroyed.

The most significant theme of the novel is the contrast between the restrictions that come with domesticity and the liberty adventure supplies. Wharton carefully utilizes language and detail in her descriptions to illustrate that “ May’s house represents all the negative aspects of domesticity” (Hadley). In one scene, Archer perceives that “ the mere fact of not looking at May, seated beside his table, under his lamp, the fact of seeing...other cities beyond New York, and a whole world beyond his world, [clears] his brain and [makes] it easier to breathe” (240). Wharton utilizes the possessive pronoun “ his” to demonstrate that Archer believes May is infringing upon his space, the only place that he can design to his own inclination. “ He looks out the window to ‘ a whole world beyond’, much as the traditional American hero looks to the landscape and the frontier to escape from a domesticated world” (Hadley). When he furnishes his room to feel the sense of control he lacks in the other aspects of his life, it is ironic because it displays he is not as rebellious as he believes himself to be.

Wharton expresses her greatest criticism of eighteenth-century New York society through the unconventional and mystifying countess. Serving as the polar opposite of May, the Countess symbolizes “ all that is unknown and exotic in European society” (Hynes). Raised in Britain by the repeatedly widowed Medora Manson and entangled in a disastrous marriage with a Polish count, Olenska is adamantly deemed an unorthodox foreigner involved in numerous scandals. Many people often make it “ cruelly clear their determination not to meet the Countess Olenska” (41). Because she attempts to file for a divorce with a husband who is implicated of engaging in an affair, she is socially isolated by this society that severely chastises

scandal. Along with Archer, she is initially discouraged and distraught over the incessant disapproval of those who are foreign and similar to her. When questioned about her feelings, she exclaims that “ the real loneliness is living among all these...people who only ask one to pretend” (65). Olenska is disconcerted to learn that a person’s reputation is honored over their honesty, which accounts for everyone’s misleading appearances. Although she is constantly critiqued, “ she has learned to find comfort and strength within herself, rather than seeking them in the external world” (Hadley). “ She doesn’t care a hang about where she lives- or about any of the little social sign-posts” (101). Against the idea of the social hierarchy, Olenska does not place any importance on her location of residency. When she tells Archer that she is “ improvident” and lives “ in the moment” when she’s satisfied, she demonstrates her disregard for wealth and status (110). Without anticipating the future, she lives in the present, valuing happiness and spontaneity over safety. She provides a contrast to all of the other characters in the novel because of her strong-will, independence, and self-complacency. Through Olenska’s character, Wharton intends to convey to both Archer and her readers that women are equally capable and harbor just as much potential as men.

When Archer first learns about Olenska and is requested to inform her of his engagement to May, “ some invincible repugnance to speak of such things to the strange foreign woman had checked the words on his lips” (23). Archer initially seems disgusted and appalled by the thought of her because of what he has learned from others. Without even knowing or understanding her, he generates assumptions based on her past and the reputation she upholds.

While convincing himself he is aiding her with adapting to New York life, Archer subconsciously falls in love and realizes he constantly yearns to be with her. Even her “lightest touch...[thrills] him like a caress” (55). He begins to feel possessive over her and is overcome with jealousy at any news of her with another man. This is because “her presence in New York enhances his own sense of himself...[and] he prefers to think of himself as unconventional and liberal...” (Daigrepoint). Wharton illustrates that Archer’s possessive behavior towards Olenska represents his eagerness to contrast himself with those in his social milieu and his desire to hold on to the only method of escape he has. Because he has been raised to believe in a certain set of ideals, behaviors, and characteristics, he is mesmerized with “Madame Olenska’s mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience” (95). Archer’s extreme fascination with her derives from her dramatic and mysterious countenance. In contrast with May’s house, Ellen’s house represents escape because she “offers the possibilities of individual freedom and experience, instinct and variety, cultural and sexual richness” (Hadley). Rather than developing an interest in her as an individual, he is fascinated with the concept of her. Archer regularly sends lilies, which represent future happiness, to May and one day decides to send the Countess “a box of yellow roses...without a card” (97). The yellow roses signify fiery beauty as well as infidelity and adultery. It is passion rather than true love that he feels for her and Wharton emphasizes this to demonstrate his obsession with escape.

The setting plays a crucial part in Wharton’s message about New York and the social oppression it places on its citizens. Shifting from New York to

Britain as Archer travels, each location is associated with a different set of beliefs. While old New York allows for solely traditional beliefs and roles, Britain serves as its reverse in that Archer views it as a place where freedom of expression is encouraged. Wharton has the characters continuously take trips to Europe or encounter British culture to display the differences in ideals. Archer realizes these differences and accepts this as a means to escape New York society. A British man named M. Rivière parallels Ned Winsett in that he is likewise a man of low financial status, but he embodies the beliefs of British society. Through Archer's discussion with M. Rivière, Wharton clarifies the contrast by indicating that the British value opinionated people and believe it is imperative for people to be able to think for themselves. She utilizes irony in this scene because myths entail that there is a 'promise offered by the idea of America...that in this new land...a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition' (Hadley). Even though America is seemingly the land of opportunity, in *The Age of Innocence*, it is Britain that offers the laxity to express individuality. Whenever Archer returns to New York, his former beliefs return and he insinuates self-denial for the sake of pleasing his family. When he desires to run away from New York, he is saddened to learn that others have tried and have ended up in places that weren't "at all different from the old world they'd left" (236). Wharton conveys that true escape from others' judgement is essentially impossible because criticism and disapproval is prevalent everywhere. He is irritated with the conformity evident in New York and despises that "the individual...is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest; people cling to any convention that keeps the family together...[and] protects the children" (93). This overarching theme states

that people must sacrifice their individuality and personal freedoms for the benefit of the society as a whole.

After the Countess leaves, rejecting Archer's proposals of beginning an affair, the novel skips twenty-five years. Now often labeled a "good citizen", Archer has successfully established an honorable reputation. Accountable for "every new movement, philanthropic, municipal or artistic," he has achieved everything his family had ever desired for him (281). However, Wharton lists his accomplishments with a dismal rather than acclaimed tone that reflects his dissatisfaction towards the monotony of his life. Believing that he "had missed the flower of life," he thinks "of it now as a thing so unattainable and improbable" (281). Although he has accomplished many significant deeds, he feels he has missed out on what he believes to be the most important aspect of life- love. He compares his forbidden love for Olenska with the lottery, claiming that it has always been impervious for him to acquire true love. "At the end of the novel, Newland reminisces about having risen up at the call to politics... To the end, Wharton emphasizes that he is defined by his social roles" (Hadley). Even after twenty-five years, Archer continues to feel confined and now that he has children, he is gratified that they will be able to experience much more freedom from judgement. When he travels to Versailles and stands below the Countess' balcony, "he has to deal all at once with the packed regrets and stifles memories of an inarticulate lifetime" (289). Archer chooses not to see Olenska, illustrating his extreme regret and resentment towards his society. By making this decision and finally facing the realization that he must let her go, he renders her a symbol of his past. "Archer loses the habit of travel in his later years, preferring to stay within the

narrow confines of the world he knows” (Evron). Wharton expresses her anti-romantic view of love and her belief that “ love...is a contingent phenomenon, inextricably bound to social and historical factors over which the lovers have little control” (Evron). In the end when all the characters revert to their traditional roles, Wharton shows that the family unit is strengthened at the expense of the individual who wonders what might have been.