

Labyrinth of love

Business



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An illustrious preacher in the 19th century, William Ellery Channing, once said, “ Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage. The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict.” According to Channing, obstacles are meant to make one stronger, as proven by Edith Wharton in her novel, *The Age of Innocence*. Wharton introduces Newland Archer and May Welland, a newly engaged couple, along with Ellen Olenska, May’s cousin, who returns to New York after ending her marital relationship.

The story centers around Archer, who falls in love with the Countess Olenska —he’s forced to choose between the woman he’s to marry and the woman he passionately desires. Wharton, through the use of metaphor, diction, and pathos, conveys that true love is a labyrinth, inevitably associated with hurdles that ultimately prompt people to attain an authentic sense of identity and clarity. Wharton’s eloquent use of metaphors makes it evident that Archer is lost in the maze of love, as he’s falling for his fiancée’s cousin rather than focusing on the fiancée herself. Though May Welland is a beautiful young woman, Archer finds himself captivated by Ellen, “[a] flash of red meteor against the snow” (109). Olenska’s allure is likened to the outer appearance of a meteor, radiant and dazzling.

Just as meteors leave craters on Earth’s surface, Ellen is leaving an imprint in Archer’s heart. However, Archer acknowledges that he’s not sure where he stands, as “ he [feels] as though he [has] been struggling for hours up the face of a steep precipice, and now...his hold [has] given way and he [is] pitching down headlong into darkness” (142). This simile illustrates the cliff that he’s been ascending as a symbol of the difficulties that he’s struck with, such as the rules of the rigid New York society. As he finally begins to grasp

the rules of life, he once again loses sight of the light at the end of the tunnel. Ellen is Archer's light, which he longs to have within his reach.

Although he is deeply in love with Ellen by this point, he follows through with his engagement, describing his wedding day as a "labyrinth" (147). He is aware of the many hardships that accompany marriage; in particular, he must live knowing that it is Ellen whom he longs to be with. Archer is blinded; he acknowledges his marriage but refuses to let go of Ellen. Conversely, Ellen isolates herself from him because she realizes that they cannot be. When they meet again, she tells him it's because of him that she does not return home to Europe.

Archer perceives her words as "some rare butterfly that the least motion might drive off on startled wings, but that might gather a flock about it if it were left undisturbed" (197). From the metaphor created, it's evident that Ellen's words are music to his ears. He fears losing the acknowledgement, and he wishes for more sayings of the sort. The use of metaphors throughout evokes a sense of true love which Archer feels for Ellen. Similarly, the pictorial diction portrays his feelings for Ellen in the context of his marriage with May.

At the park, Ellen is delighted by Archer's arrival, and he too experiences a "disproportionate joy in their nonsense" (109). His happiness being outlined as disproportionate implicates that his loyalty should lie with his wife, and that his wife should evoke that sense of elation. Instead, he delves too deeply into his affair with Ellen. In addition, the word "nonsense" suggests that he's aware of the folly of his actions. However, he "[builds] within

himself a kind of sanctuary in which [Ellen thrones] among his secret thoughts and longings” after she has distanced herself for a period of time (214).

Ellen residing in a sanctuary in Archer’s head implies that she’ll safely be in his thoughts forever. Though it appears that he has moved on, he still yearns to be with Ellen to the extent that he “ wishes [May] dead,” a thought “ so fascinating and overmastering, that its enormity [does] not immediately strike him” (241). Archer is unmistakably overwhelmed by the hodgepodge of feelings in his heart. While he does love May as her husband, he also loves Ellen, as more than just a cousin-in-law. To wish death upon someone so dear demonstrates his sense of confusion and the darkness of his thoughts. Though he is undoubtedly lost in the labyrinth of love, he eventually finds his way out.

He remains faithful to his marriage and to May. Society’s stringent standards along with “ their long years together [show] that it [does] not so much matter if marriage [is] a dull duty, as long as it [keeps] the dignity of a duty” (281). Archer now realizes the importance of remaining loyal to his companion. Though he implies that his marriage was dull, and that he was simply conforming to society’s expectations, he’s finally enlightened—he’s grown as a person. Additionally, the use of pathos successfully captures Archer’s varied sentiments.

Not long after his introduction to Ellen, Archer tells her that “ it’s [she] who [is]...opening [his] eyes to things [he’d] looked at so long that [he’d] ceased to see them” (63). Archer’s words evoke a sense of warmth and love, as he’s

flirting with the Countess. After a length of time, after Archer and May are married, May says goodbye to him when dropping him off at her grandmother's house, " her eyes so blue that he wondered if they had shone on him through tears" (230). This implies that May is aware of his outside affair. Perhaps the goodbye indicates a parting for more than just the day.

The fact that Archer considers the possibility of tears, however, indicates that he still cherishes his wife's feelings and thoughts. Archer appears to be caught up in an obstacle—who does he genuinely love? When Ellen tells him that there's no way that they can be together when he is married to her cousin, Archer is greatly affected. " Suddenly he [feels] something stiff and cold on his lashes, and [perceives] that he [has] been crying, and that the wind [has] frozen his tears" (237). Archer's apparent grief is highlighted by the frozen tears on his eyelashes. It's palpable that Archer yearns to have Ellen in his life in place of May. Though he doesn't get his way, he does become " a faithful husband; and when May suddenly died...he had honestly mourned her" (281).

Through his experience with love, he learned the value of faith. When his wife passed away, he genuinely grieved for her. Ultimately, he grew stronger and discovered a sense of identity. He realized the man he wanted to be: faithful and loyal. Wharton's profound use of pathos goes to prove Archer's sensibility and that he discovers himself through love's maze. Life's rollercoaster put Archer through many ups and downs.

The rhetorical use of metaphor and diction depicts Archer's love for both May and Ellen. Wharton effectively tugs at heartstrings through her use of pathos,

further exemplifying Archer's multitude of sentiments. Though this labyrinth of love blinded Archer at the start, he eventually gained insight, and emerged a better man. Love and commitment come with adversities that will undeniably make people stronger.