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Torn by Tension

Modernism in Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence

Kathryn Taylor

The end of the Great War marked massive shifts in almost every aspect of the world. Economics, politics, trade, domestic life, industry, technology, science, and the arts all underwent massive changes that could be linked directly to the loss of an entire generation of people and the complete loss of stability in most of the world. The Victorian Age was officially over and the rest of Europe was trying to come to terms with the effects of the War. Artists, philosophers, and writers turned to the ideas presented in Modernism to help create sense in the chaos. Modernism was marked by a binary of tension as well as the inherent instability and uncertainty of the future. Modernism's dependence on tension between the Old World and the New allowed writers like Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Virginia Woolf to explore a nostalgia for the Old and a hope for the New. However, Wharton in particular was able to capture this inherent tension generated in Modernism by using an Old World setting to convey New World ideals.

Wharton wrote *The Age of Innocence* in 1920, not long after the end of the First World War. Wharton uses this novel to explore the New York society of her youth—a society that was lost during the War and was rapidly fading into the past. Wharton uses perceptions of purity and the reality of power to examine aspects of modernity within the three main characters of her novel

while creating a nostalgia for a world lost. While May Wellend is perceived by society, and by Newland Archer, as perfectly innocent and pure, she is an expert manipulator and uses that to retain her power within the matriarchal power structure created by her family and reinforced by society. Ellen Olenska, on the other hand, is perceived as foreign and wrong so society shuns her to protect the world that society has carefully built, despite their envy for her riches and her access to high culture. Much like May, Archer is perceived by society to be perfect, but, in reality, he struggles to fit in and is ostracized when he finds comfort in Ellen. Wharton uses and subverts the power structures present in the novel as well as perception to reveal the different aspects of Modernism—contradiction, nostalgia, and tension respectively—in her main characters in a non-Modern setting.

The way in which women in Wharton's world create familial and societal power structures based on codes of conduct, and how those women use and subvert those power structures to support their beliefs and shun outsiders, is the main focus of Judith Fryer's essay "Purity and Power in 'The Age of Innocence.'" In a similar vein, Margaret Jay Jessee explores how the characters use masks of perception and social conduct codes to hide from reality or perceive reality differently in her essay "Trying it On: Narration and Masking in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*." These essays, combined with Carol J. Singley's exploration of changing cultural codes in her essay "Bourdieu, Wharton and Changing Culture in *The Age of Innocence*," set up the chance to explore the power structures in Wharton's novel and how the characters' perceptions of reality showcase the core tenets of Modernism in her novel. When the novel is examined through the lenses presented by these critics, a commentary on Modernism is generated in a non-Modern context. Wharton is exploring a nostalgia for the Old World, but she also explores the opportunities presented by the New World through her characters and what that meant for her changing cultural context.

Wharton was in a unique position to examine this tension and contradiction that marked the Modernism of her time. In Diane Cousineau's book, *Letters and Labyrinths: Women Writing/Cultural Codes*, she explains that an author must be positioned between two worlds in order to examine cultural codes. Alan Price supports this idea in the preface of his book *The End of the Age of Innocence* when he states that "Wharton entered one type of world and witnessed the emergence of another" and that "the world Wharton valued was largely lost. It was obliterated by the mass world, a

world without taste, a world without an aristocracy of intellect" (xvii). Both Cousineau and Price recognize that Wharton's unique placement in history allows her to examine cultural codes and both the Old and New Worlds in a way that couldn't be done in another time. For example, Archer's continual longing for Ellen is reminiscent of the nostalgia that much of Europe held for the lost Old World. By writing alongside the emergence of Modernism, Wharton has the ability to infuse her characters with the very traits she was seeing in the changing world around her.

The Old World of New York society where Wharton was raised had strict cultural codes that demanded a very specific type of conduct and etiquette; Archer tries to adhere to said codes, but ultimately fails. Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield lists several principles of politeness that should drive all aspects of life in his etiquette manual "Principles of politeness, and of knowing the world." According to Stanhope, all young men, and to some extent young women, should be humble, honest, well-bred, practiced in the art of conversation, well-dressed, and show great decorum. In a way, Newland Archer showcases all these characteristics. He is a well-bred, educated, successful young man who managed to secure a great marriage and the good opinions of his peers. However, Chesterfield would be appalled by some of Archer's more awkward moments. Archer's inability to traverse the finer aspects of high society and his struggles in the art of conversation show how he does not fit into New York society. Archer often blurts out his thoughts in conversations, leading to him be ostracized by his peers, such as when he states that "women ought to be free—as free as we are" (Wharton 20). Archer's insistence on the hypocrisy of the situation and the blunt way he expresses his feelings marks him as different from his peers. His defenses of Ellen Olenska and constant examinations of society lead to his peers mocking him or ignoring him completely. Archer often thinks like a society man, but the words he speaks reveal him to be a misfit that doesn't quite fit into the role that New York society would have him play.

One of the repeated motifs in *The Age of Innocence* is the fact that Archer can understand everything that May is saying just by looking at her. A nineteenth-century conduct manual titled *A Young Man's Own Book* describes the art of observation as extremely important (7). While Archer seems to believe that he has mastered the art, this manual shows that he does not quite pass muster. Instead of using his observational skills to craft a conversation, he uses it to project his own thoughts, feelings, and desires on

May and Ellen. Archer's own son points out that May and Archer likely didn't know each other as well as they thought since they believed in completely different images of each other. "You just sat and watched each other, and guessed at what was going on underneath" (Wharton 164). Throughout the novel, Archer believes that he knows exactly what May was thinking, but here, Dallas reveals that Archer may not have been as all-seeing as he thought. May tells her son that when she asked Archer to give up the thing he most wanted, he did; however, Archer reveals that she never asked him. They simply thought that the other knew what they were thinking and used that to drive their conversations and their decisions—something that was not considered true "good breeding" to their society.

Archer is not the only character that appears to fulfill the role society gives, but in reality does not quite meet the standards of nineteenth-century conduct. May Wellend wears the right clothes, attends the right events, and has quite the mastery of archery—all skills that were appropriate in society's eyes. However, May is also incredibly manipulative and a master at playing with masks and perception. Both *The Young Lady's Own Book* and Fryer explain the roles of domesticity given to women. *The Young Lady's Own Book* states that a woman's kingdom is her household and that if women do not live completely virtuously, society will fall. May's symbolic wearing of white and her relation to the Greek goddess Diana reveal that she fulfills those roles well. White is traditionally associated with purity and innocence in Western society and Diana is both the goddess of the moon and virgins. The huntresses in her hunt have all sworn to remain chaste and the moon is a symbol of fertility and power. May's perceived innocence hides the fact that she holds the power over Archer. Archer's constant comparisons of May to Diana showcase how May is virtuous and a moral pillar, at least in Archer's eyes. May wears white to show her purity, and she fulfills her roles of a good wife and mother by being subservient to Archer.

However, what Archer does not see, or rather does not wish to see, is that May plays him expertly. There are several occasions where May uses her skills in conversation to steer Archer away from Ellen. Upon realizing that Archer is going to Washington to see Ellen, May manages to manipulate the situation so that Ellen is coming to visit her while Archer is going to Washington. Instead of being able to see Ellen, Archer will be forced to miss her:

“What a pity,” she said, “that you and Ellen will cross each other on the way!—Newland,” she added, turning to her mother and aunt, “is obliged to go to Washington....it doesn’t seem right to ask Newland to give up an important engagement for the firm—does it? (Wharton 127)

May plays the situation perfectly by keeping Ellen and Archer apart, forcing Ellen onto May’s turf, and informing her family that the situation must be dealt with. It is just after May’s maneuvering that the women in May’s family band together to not-so-subtly show Archer that they will support May and ostracize him if he doesn’t choose carefully. May then proves her quick mind by informing Ellen that she is pregnant, forcing Ellen to decide that she cannot continue on with Archer and that he must stay for his family, so Ellen leaves for Europe. The light of victory in May’s eyes after she reveals both her pregnancy and Ellen’s leaving finally reveals just how well May manipulated the situation (158). While May seems to be subservient to Archer and allows him to believe that he is pulling the strings (all things that *The Young Lady’s Own Book* recommends), she is actually ensuring that she does not get left and that her situation stays desirable.

By all accounts, Ellen follows many of the rules laid out by the nineteenth-century conduct manuals. However, her separation from her husband, choices in dress, and refusal to attend church cast a pall on her otherwise impeccable conduct. Ellen represents a lack of moral fortitude to the rest of society. She has left her husband, presumably by cheating on him, shows more skin than she should, and does not do her best to uphold the moral pillars of society. She socializes with the wrong people and she appears to be having an affair with her cousin’s beau. At first, Ellen’s family bands together around her and supports her, however, her refusal to return to her husband and her relationship with Archer strains the family, and they decide to retract their protection in order to protect their culture and their power structure. Ellen poses a threat because she does not conform to society, so she must be cast out.

Ellen does not pretend to be subservient and she does not exude an overall purity the same way her cousin does. The conduct manuals of this time were very firm that the moral fortitude of the world rested upon the shoulders of women and that anyone who did not take this obligation seriously was morally corrupt. So, Ellen’s innate feelings of power and her perceived lack of moral fortitude caused society to perceive her as a threat. In addition to her more scandalous style of dress, Ellen’s decision to leave

her husband and the fact that she is considering a divorce causes quite the scandal. While her family initially rallies around her, her continued insistence on a divorce causes them to question her morality and place in their family. They make it clear that they will not tolerate her presence if she continues to be “morally bankrupt.” But when Ellen tells Archer that she is leaving and returning home, she reveals that she is far more pure and innocent than society perceived her to be:

“I can’t stay here and lie to the people who’ve been good to me.”

“But that’s the very reason why I ask you to come away!”

“And destroy their lives when they’ve helped me to remake mine?” (144)

Ellen cannot lie and continue a liaison with Archer because it would be betraying her family, so she decides to do what society perceives as the right thing and leave. Throughout the entire affair, Ellen has been conflicted and, in the end, decides that she cannot follow through with it. While May and her family are more than willing to manipulate the situation to suit their desires, Ellen makes the decision for herself that staying with Archer is not the right thing to do.

Each character displays certain aspects of Modernism, but each character embodies one aspect more than others. May relies entirely on being able to contradict the expectations set forth by society and she even winds up with children that would contradict all the things she stood for. May represents the Old World and all of the tradition that supports it. She fulfills the role of wife, mother, and socialite well, but she also subverts expectations by manipulating Ellen and Archer to maintain power. When faced with the possibility of Archer leaving her for her cousin, May rallies her family around her and creates a situation that forces Archer to keep in line with society instead of chasing after Ellen. Even as she ages, May refuses to let the traditions of the Old World go, and Archer states that she doesn’t realize that “the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her ever being conscious of the change” (160). But May’s life falls into contradiction because she believes that her children will follow in her ways, when, in reality, they have found a new order and are uninterested in the past. Wharton uses May’s adherence to the past and her children’s adherence to a new future to embody the contradictions inherent in Modernism. Modernism balances nostalgia and excitement, longing and fear, and any other contradictory feelings that crop up in a rapidly changing world. May’s character manages to balance these contradictions by juxtaposing the two worlds within her.

She contradicts societal norms and gives birth to the new order that is fully immersed in Modernism.

While May represents contradiction, Archer represents a byproduct of May's contradiction—tension. Throughout the novel, Archer is caught between two worlds: what he wants and what he should want. He is trapped by society, but is too afraid of change to break free of it. He finds beauty in May's world, but longs for Ellen's. As his affair with Ellen progresses, Archer's indecision causes tension both within himself and in his interactions with others. Archer becomes short-tempered, hypercritical of others, and unsure in his choices. The tonal difference between most of the novel and the last chapter showcases the tension that Archer experienced. The chapters leading up to thirty-three were anxious, fast-paced, and excited as Archer tried to decide between the two women and his desires. However, in chapter thirty-four, Archer's decision was made, and this chapter occurs years after he has come to terms with it. Archer is settled, content even. He is no longer torn between his desires and his duty. However, when Dallas mentions Ellen, Archer's tension returns. He struggles to communicate and feels inadequate (165). Archer settled into May's world and the re-emergence of Ellen's world brings back all of Archer's tension. This tension, that is a defining aspect of Modernism, exists because it is difficult to reconcile the past and the future. Archer's relationships with May and Ellen, especially in the last chapter, show the difficulty of this reconciliation. Archer eventually decides to stay out of Ellen's world and resolves the tension by keeping the two worlds separate.

The reason May and Archer struggle with Ellen is because she represents change and the future. She should follow all the rules that the Old World has set forth in order to maintain power, but instead Ellen finds power within herself and makes her own way. Her decision to leave her husband, her clothes, and her conduct leave her outside the power structure and these decisions place her among the New World crowd. Fryer describes how Ellen threatens the power structure and causes society to actively attempt to destroy her because Ellen does not adhere to tradition and instead looks to the future. But Ellen's embodiment of progress marks her as a threat to May's embodiment of tradition so Ellen must be sent away. At first, society is more than willing to welcome Ellen back, but when it becomes clear that Ellen has no desire to adhere to their ways, society casts her out. The only character that does not see Ellen as threatening is Archer because he carries the tension

of Modernism in him. He longs for the world that Ellen represents. Even years later, Archer thinks of Ellen like “some imaginary beloved in a book” (160). Both Archer’s longing for and descriptions of Ellen surround her in nostalgia. In this way, Ellen is contradictory because she represents both the future and nostalgia for the past.

Despite the majority of *The Age of Innocence* taking place in a pre-Modern world, Wharton manages to infuse her characters and their world with aspects of Modernism. Each character subverts society’s expectations of them and uses these perceptions to create a space within the power structure. Archer’s inability to choose between the two women and the worlds they represent gives the reader an insight into how Modernism is about compromise. There is good in the old and the new. The future is terrifying because it is not secure, but the past is restrictive, even if it was stable. The instability of the post-war world made navigating this new landscape difficult, but Wharton’s characters manage to find a middle ground where they can reflect fondly on the past, while also seeing new changes available in the future.

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