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A Clandestine Countess in a Sociable Setting: Analysing Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* from a Modernist Lens

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Abstract

Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920) is an American novel of manners set in pre-war New York society. It explores the dichotomies present in old New York by comparing the new ways with the old in the form of characters representing contrasts between American and European ideals. This study aims at understanding the elements of modernism prevalent in the novel. Taking into account Madam Olenska's clandestine nature with regard to the hieroglyphic world she enters, the contrasts and comparisons between America and Europe, the evolution of America and sense of innocence of the time, the analysis proves how Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* is an escapist work that vouches for divorce from the old ways.

Keywords

America vs Europe, Novel of manners, Innocence, Clandestine nature, World War I, Disillusionment.

Introduction

Modernism as a literary movement questioned the traditional sense of morality, religion and social organization. Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* ascribes social commentary on the ideals of old New York society. While the novel is written in 1920, it is set in the 1870s. Wharton paints the New York of her childhood as an elegy to the world she grew up in which was destroyed due to World War I. The stark contrasts between the old and the new world in the novel exhibit the disillusionment created by the war thereby questioning the arbitrary nature of old New York society and its customs. This study aims at understanding the modernist elements present in the novel.

Overview of the Plot

Set in 1870's New York society, the plot revolves around the character of Newland Archer who is eagerly anticipating his engagement and eventual wedding with his betrothed May Welland. While she is everything he hopes and dreams for in a wife, the dynamic quickly changes once her cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska, who has just escaped an abusive marriage, enters the New York social scene. She makes Newland look at things from a perspective contrasting from what his society dispenses which makes him all the more discontent about his situation. He ultimately marries May but has a short lived affair with Ellen whom he loves deeply and is willing to leave his wife for. When he finally decides to follow his desire to be with Ellen, May reveals to him that she is with child. To this he cannot help but cave in to his yearnings and sacrifices his love for Ellen, who leaves to settle in Paris. Years later when his children are grown up and May has passed away, he is offered an opportunity to be able to see Ellen in Paris. In the climactic event of the novel, Archer decides not to see Ellen and live with her memories instead.

Modernism in *The Age of Innocence*

The term modernism is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and styles of literature and the other arts in the early decades of the twentieth century, but especially after World War I (1914 - 1918). Important intellectual precursors of modernism, in this sense, are thinkers who had questioned the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion, morality and also traditional ways of conceiving the human self-thinkers (M. H. Abrams). While *The Age of Innocence* is written post World War I, it is set in the era of old New York society in the 1870's. Wharton, through her

elaborate descriptions of the time, gives an ode to the past while also nudging the new way of thinking and questioning existing norms through Archer's dilemma. Modernist elements in the novel are seen through Madam Olenska's clandestine nature with regard to the hieroglyphic world she enters, the contrasts and comparisons between America and Europe, the evolution of America and sense of innocence of the time.

Madam Olenska's Clandestine Nature

The novel establishes that after she returns from Europe to settle in New York, Ellen Olenska lives in a house deemed bohemian as per the society she is part of. She herself describes it as *des quartiers excentriques*¹ which literally translates to eccentric neighbourhoods. Her society looks down upon such neighbourhoods as they are inhabited by artists, musicians and 'people who wrote.' Thus the artistic faculties are treated with sneering insults. It is seen that her family dislikes the poverty of her living and not the peril. Despite all the jeers to her state of living, she is happy with her dwelling for which she quotes "How do you like my funny house? To me it's like heaven." This explains her wish for emancipation from the patterns of society she is expected to fit in. She learns that in order to live her life as she pleases she needs to be secretive and do what she wishes in a clandestine manner.

She lends her own coat to her house help so that she doesn't catch a cold, thereby ignoring the class differences. She speaks her mind about how the proper parties of her society bore her instead of chirping falsities. She enjoys the company of Mrs Struthers whose artful gatherings are considered too explicit

¹ Ellen entered her house while Archer was already showed in and waiting for her, observing the peculiar things in her home.

for the tastes of respectable society. All of these actions deem her different or odd by the society who initially rejects her. Due to these barriers to her freedom, she is compelled to keep a low profile. This societal pressure ultimately isolates her emotionally as she questions "Is New York such a labyrinth? I thought it so straight up and down - like Fifth Avenue."² She describes society life and the lack of understanding of its customs as the reason for her anxiety and frustration as she states "I always feel as if I were in a convent again - or on the stage, before a dreadfully polite audience that never applauds." She further expresses her exhaustion by detesting the fact that she has to constantly pretend among these people.

Hieroglyphic World

It is evident that moral prejudices prevail in Archer, Ellen and May's society. Wharton paints the picture of these prejudices in the form of emphasis on people's appearances and outwardly manners without really understanding the inner workings of the human minds. When people fall out of line, they are cast out of the society as they affect the vanity of the world. When Ellen wants to get a divorce or Beaufort brings dishonour to the family with scandalous embezzlement, they have to face social pariah³ instead of being backed by their family. The society upholds the standards of decency above courage as you are welcome only if you act the way society desires and going against it is an act of courage that is not rewarded. Stylishness, and not substance, is what old New York values most.

² Perplexed by the complexities of the society, Ellen utters her confusion.

³ Beaufort's wife requests granny Mingott to help them out of the situation but is faced with rejection. When Ellen returns after separating from the Count, she is ignored and cast out of society before Archer comes to rescue her.

Ellen further describes New York as oppressively hospitable. She looks at realities instead of dwelling over fantasies as opposed to May, a product of New York society, who was trained to conceal imaginary wounds under a Spartan smile.

Through Archer's previous illicit affair with Mrs Thorley, a married woman, Wharton describes the farce nature of the world as "A smiling, bantering, humouring, watchful and incessant lie. A lie by day, a lie by night, a lie in every touch and every look; a lie in every caress and every quarrel; a lie in every word and in every silence." Wharton explores this society by stating "In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs." In simpler words, hints were the only way these well-bred people could communicate.

While visiting a historical museum, Archer and Ellen observe an object in display that was once considered necessary in a forgotten age but is now labelled 'use unknown'. Through this instance, Wharton comments on the blind importance given to arbitrary things while the human emotion that is constant and real is sacrificed.

Contrasts and Comparisons Between America and Europe

While America is considered to be the flag bearer of liberty and freedom, Europeans realize that they were freer before they settled in America. 1870s America had certain liberal ideologies like not having arranged marriages but it still lacked the sovereignty that outsiders assumed it had. By resorting to divorcing the Count, Ellen assumes that she would be conforming to the American ideals of freedom which were deemed unacceptable in Europe. She is heavily mistaken as America was not accustomed to the idea of freedom

through divorce yet. While their legislation favours divorce, their social customs don't, especially not if the woman has appearances against her or exposes herself to any unconventional behaviour.⁴ This made a strong case against Ellen. She points out the languid nature of American customs by saying "It seems stupid to have discovered America only to make it into a copy of another country... Do you suppose Christopher Columbus would have taken all that trouble just to go to the opera with the Selfridge Merrys?" In addition to that, the Frenchman Archer conversed with believed in preserving ones intellectual liberty and critical independence. In contrast to that, New York society appears intellectually enslaved. Thus we see how Archer and Ellen yearn for a world where they could be together unabashedly while they are stuck in this hieroglyphic one.

Evolution of America

Ezra Pound's phrase to "make it new" intends and upholds modernism (Morley). The evolving nature of America gives leeway to modernist ideologies of questioning existing norms. The Sillertons' education and Mrs Struthers' scandalously artful parties represent this ideology. They are considered a thorn in New York society for their intellectual and artistic prowess on pursuing revolutionary things and yet they did not cease to do so.

May and Ellen are opposite ends of a spectrum and symbolic to Archer's dilemma as May represents old ideals while Ellen represents the new ones. The reason why Archer chose to live a life he detested with May and never rekindled his romance with Ellen despite her being steps away from him was the fear of changed dynamics that would shatter the innocence in his

⁴ Ellen is constantly dubbed a misfit in her society as she does things in an odd or different way by their standards. This further contributed to blame her for the failure of her marriage.

outlook towards their romance. By the end of the novel, with over two decades passed, America is a changed place and represents most of Countess Olenska's ideals making May's death metaphorical to the death of the old ideals. Archer's utterance "Just say I'm old fashioned" in order to escape seeing Ellen represents his choice of living in the fantasy of the past rather than the present reality.

Innocence of the time

May personifies the society's innocence that steals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience. By not consummating their affair and sticking to established ideals and promises, Archer and Ellen try to preserve May's innocence. But when May lies to Ellen about the surety of her pregnancy so that she would leave and reveals her pregnancy to Archer in order to stop him from escaping their marriage, she implicitly reveals her knowing of their affair all along. Thus she shatters this illusion of innocence.

Conclusion

Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* is an ode to the world that's gone. It judiciously romanticizes the old world while yearning for a new one. The reader observes that the protagonist is torn between opposite ends of a spectrum and ultimately chooses honour over bravery in an attempt to protect an innocence that is ultimately a falsity and nothing more. The sense of alienation, loss and despair with no sense of closure dubs modernism in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*.

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