

Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*:

A Cultural Studies Reading

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Abstract: *The Age of Innocence*, a novel written by Edith Wharton in 1920, demonstrates the polished outward manners of powerful wealthy families of the 1870s New York. The novel offers a good opportunity for *cultural studies* of an American society at the end of the nineteenth century. Through language, Edith Wharton has turned social and individual behaviors of New Yorkers into a text which makes reading and interpretation of those people possible.

Given that the word culture has, and has had, myriad meanings and changing significance for different societies and in different periods, for a study of this kind a variety of factors (like *capitalism*, *class*, *gender*, *city*, and *family*) are considered crucial. This study focuses on some cultural concepts dominant in *The Age of Innocence*: *high art*, *capitalism*, *city* and *citizenship*, *family*, and *marriage*.

Key words: Cultural studies; Edith Wharton; *The Age of Innocence*; High art; Capitalism; City; Family; Marriage.

Before the 1960s and 1970s, "culture was associated with art, literature, and classical music [, and to] have 'culture' was to possess a certain taste for particular kinds of artistic endeavor" (Rivkin and Ryan 1025). In recent years word *culture* has found a broader range of meanings. It includes not only *high culture*—the best thought with value and authority, but also *low culture*—popular and mass media—and both traditional and new forms of expression such as film and television (Campbell and Kean, Introduction 11-12). Culture is defined as "the ensemble of social processes by which meanings are produced, circulated and exchanged,... and all these 'social processes' can be 'read', interpreted, and contested as texts" (qtd. in Campbell and Kean, Introduction 12). In his 1986 *Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association*, J. Hillis Miller asserted that recently literary study has not been concerned with theory and language anymore, and has turned toward "history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, the social context, the material base" (qtd. in Montrose 777). Louis Montrose argues that despite this separation between the linguistic and the social, they are associated with one another; "on the one hand, the social is understood to be discursively constructed; and on the other, language-use is understood to be always and necessarily dialogical, to be socially and materially determined and constrained" (777). He also observes that literature is a social product which is not only produced in a specific historical, social, and cultural context, but also is socially productive and produces some kind of culture (782). In addition to these definitions for culture, John Fiske asserts that some of the theories of the *cultural studies* approach are

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based on Marxist assumptions, and culture scholars believe that there is a reciprocal relation between culture and meanings made by it on the one side, and social structure on the other, while neither of them can be defined without the other (305). These meanings construct both the social experience and the individual identity of a people in an industrial capitalist society, while the dominant classes struggle to 'naturalize' the culture and ideology that satisfy their desires into the 'commonsense' of the society (Fiske 305-306).

Obviously, reading *The Age of Innocence* in terms of the ways it is concerned with culture is highly rewarding for what is predominant in the novel is the cultural life of a specific society at a specific period in American history, that is, the high society of 1870s New York. In this novel, Wharton deals with societal values and cultural practices of a people, she presents how cultural values change from one generation to the next one. The novel's broad scope provides a good opportunity for critics to study different aspects of a certain American social milieu. The ironic structure of the novel, the mores of American high society, and the women's social status are among the major topics which are explored in Wharton's novel. However, the present study discusses some of the dominant notions associated with culture, that is, *high art*, *capitalism*, *city*, *family*, and *marriage*. Moreover, in examining the cultural values and ideologies of 1870s New York, this article draws upon the insights of critics such as Pierre Bourdieu, John Fiske, and Lauren Berlant.

The Age of Innocence, published in 1920, portrays the 1870s New York high society. Louis Auchincloss suggests that the novel "is written in a Proustian mood of remembered things that invokes the airless atmosphere of an old, ordered, small town New York..." (29). Following the habit of the Victorian novelists, Edith Wharton sets her story in the era of her childhood to give a historical aura to it. Through the novel, the author exposes the polished outward manners of powerful wealthy families who follow strict codes of social and personal custom and behavior. Most of the characters in the novel are the product of these stultifying social rules from which there is no escape. What concerns Wharton, as Jennifer Haytock notes, are the ideas of modernism, the sense of culture under the impression of World War I, and different attitudes towards women and beliefs shaping their lives, like marriage, divorce, behavioral patterns, and money (Introduction 1-2).

Edith Wharton begins *The Age of Innocence* at the Academy of Music in New York, while Christine Nilsson is singing in Faust. Right from the outset, Wharton puts the reader in the social and cultural milieu of the 1870s New York upper class people. They are a fashionable people who go operas "... in private broughams, in the spacious family landau, or in the humbler but more convenient 'Brown coupé' "(1; ch. 1). Also, to give us right from the beginning a more compelling sense of the importance of hierarchy the passage continues, "To come to the Opera in a Brown coupé was almost as honorable a way of arriving as in one's own carriage; ..." (ibid). Here, Pierre Bourdieu's statement about the relation between taste in art and social class can be aptly quoted. In his *Distinction*, Bourdieu states that culture and taste in literature, painting, music, and other arts are linked to educational level and social origin (1028). He argues that the arts and their consumers are socially constructed hierarchically, and "This predisposes tastes to function as markers of 'class'", and in addition, *culture* acquisition and its practice distinguish classes of individuals (ibid.).

In the hierarchy of arts, opera is considered as *high art*, and according to Bourdieu its consumers are upper class people. Going to the opera is a cultural practice which marks the class of the attendants. Therefore, right from the outset we know that Wharton's dramatic personae are upper class New Yorkers. We encounter Newland Archer, the protagonist and the focused consciousness of the novel, at the opera for the first time. He is a gentleman lawyer and the spirit of New York has penetrated into the warp and woof of his personality from childhood. He, for instance, goes late to the opera because "... New York [is] a metropolis, and perfectly aware that in metropolises it [is] 'not the thing' to arrive early at the opera; ..." (2; ch. 1), and this idea plays an important role in Newland's New York.

The Archers attach importance to literature and art, and Mrs. Archer thinks "... how much more agreeable and cultivated society had been when it included such figures as Washington Irving, Fitz-Greene Halleck and the poet of 'The Culprit Fay'" (100; ch. 12). Among Newland's books arrived from London, there are "a new volume of Herbert Spencer, another collection of Guy de Maupassant's incomparable tales, and a novel called 'Middlemarch,' as to which there had lately been interesting things said in the reviews" (137; ch. 15). He is familiar with Italian art and has read Ruskin, John Addington and Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*. Newland regards himself superior to other gentlemen known to him, because he has read and

thought more than them. These cultural practices indicate Newland Archer and his family's *distinction* and *taste* in perceiving and appreciating works of literature and art. *Distinction* is one of the key concepts in Pierre Bourdieu's cultural theories. Phillip Barrish remarks:

Distinction is characteristically demonstrated through acts of taste. One earns distinction through exhibiting a nuanced ability to distinguish among art objects, consumption choices, and lifestyle practices alike. Taste classifies the external world, but, as Bourdieu powerfully demonstrates, it also 'classifies the classifier'. (Introduction 6-7)

Ellen Olenska is one of Wharton's characters who merits particular attention due to her unique social manner and cultural fashion. Emily J. Orlando observes that Ellen Olenska has 'the seeing eye', a unique virtue of French culture. Orlando argues that "This *seeing eye* is for Wharton a kind of artistic sensibility, an intuitive ability to discern what is most artistic and least trendy, and it also endows an individual with the gift of recognizing, as Olenska does, the difference between 'vision' and reality" (171). While New Yorkers are after living 'fashionably', Ellen Olenska wants to make her own 'fashion'. She has decorated her little house with a small table, a little Greek bronze, and a couple of Italian-looking pictures. Though Newland is familiar with Italian art but these pictures befuddle him, for he is not accustomed to such pictures. Countess Olenska has lived among artists and musicians in Europe and is completely 'Europeanized'. She is not too much concerned with the deadening life style of the New Yorkers, seeks divorce and wants to set herself free. She is fond of poetry and art, and beauty is like an air to her. Ellen's overall character and taste give her a 'distinction' and make her seem exotic to the New York tribes. Though Countess Olenska is accustomed to European culture, due to the fact that her cultural practices are markedly different from those of the New Yorkers, and unacceptable to them, she is viewed as an outsider and, interestingly, an unrefined lady. The fact that a woman of such a wide culture as Ellen Olenska is regarded so indicates the chameleon-like nature of this concept, how different people from different milieus have their own definition and understanding of this social institute.

In the late nineteenth century, young rural people and many Europeans immigrated to industrial cities of America, and urbanization created the culture of consumerism; America's consumer economy was built upon mass industrial production (McGovern 338). Women were the main consumers of commodities, and consumer economy endowed them with independence, individuality and opportunities for self-express (ibid. 339). New forms of entertainments such as dancing, luxurious dinner parties, and spectator sports offered leisure to the rigid and boring lives of the Americans (ibid. 342). One of Wharton's concerns in *The Age of Innocence* is to expose this consumer culture of New Yorkers. Besides attending opera, New Yorkers' other cultural practices are reading books, going to theatre, sports like archery, and giving ball and dinner parties which demonstrate their culture of conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, as Joy L. Davis observes, the dining ritual is an occasion for the novel's characters to reveal their hostilities, rivalries, hypocrisy and consumer culture hidden beneath their social posture (465).

The Beaufort family gives ball on an opera night annually and their house possesses a ball-room. Mr. Beaufort is an Englishman who has come to America and has married Medora Manson's cousin. Now he is a banker associated with Wall Street and a wealthy man of the world. About Beauforts' ball-room, Wharton writes

... [they had] their own red velvet carpet and have it rolled down the steps by their own footmen, under their own awning, instead of hiring it with the supper and the ball-room chairs... [And on the way going to the ball-room one could see] from afar the many-candled lusters reflected in the polished parquetry, and beyond that the depths of a conservatory where camellias and tree-ferns arched their costly foliage over seats of black and gold bamboo. (18-19; ch. 3)

This detailed description depicts the luxurious life of the Beauforts. The 'detailed, pictorial description' is one of Wharton's narrative strategies which, according to Scorsese, helps the reader to know people better (Boswell 123). In addition, these dinner parties provide a suitable setting for New Yorkers to exhibit their strict concern about the manner of dressing. It is very important for them to be dressed stylishly for the occasion. Wharton writes, "It was usual for ladies who received in the evenings to wear what were called

'simple dinner dresses': a close-fitting armour of whale-boned silk, slightly open in the neck, with lace ruffles filling in the crack, and tight sleeves with a flounce uncovering just enough wrist to show an Etruscan gold bracelet or a velvet band" (103; ch. 12), while Madam Olenska has put on a dress heedless of the tradition. In another passage on the Van der Luydens' dinner party, Wharton describes:

Mrs. van der Luyden looked more than ever like a Cabanel, and Mrs. Archer, in her grandmother's seed-pearls and emeralds, reminded her son of an Isabey miniature. All the ladies had on their handsomest jewels, but it was characteristic of the house and the occasion that these were mostly in rather heavy old-fashioned settings.... (59; ch. 8)

As it was mentioned earlier, in the late nineteenth century, New York City became industrialized and turned into a capitalist society whose dominant culture was consumerism. One of the concerns of cultural studies is, as John Fiske remarks, "[the study of] the generation and circulation of meanings in industrial societies (...)" (305). Wharton's detailed descriptions about elaborate dinners, dresses, jewelries and magnificent houses convey the consumer culture of 1870s capitalist New York. These cultural practices are meaningful and essential to Wharton's characters, who are the products of a capitalist system. Ellen Olenska's social experiences, however, are different, she has an easier way of life, not wholly contaminated with consumerism.

Also relevant to our discussion are the concepts of city and citizenship. The novel narrates the story of the New York City penetrated into the blood of its citizens. This New York is a conventional dull city turned into an influential personified character which sees, knows, confirms, and governs all the crucial affairs and beliefs of its citizens. Wharton's image of New York is "a dark world below the placid surface, a world whose inhabitants tend to be grasping, dissatisfied, emotionally twisted creatures. Here, all is not well" (Boswell 164). Nearly all the characters have submitted to the staid conventions imposed on them by New York. They follow dictates of taste, and "Many institutional and social practices [of these people] are aimed at inducing a visceral identification of personal identity with nationality (Berlant 37). These New Yorkers love their city and regard all these social practices, experiences, and ways of life as a significant part of their identity, and their resemblance to other people. Dinner parties, for instance, provide them with a social setting to express their ideas about private familial matters as well as social institutions. Only Madam Olenska, a 'foreigner', acts differently and helps Newland Archer see differently. As she brushes away the layers of conventionality, Newland becomes awake to reality. He suspects that May's purity is a "... factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses..." (43; ch. 6). Newland's skepticism and hatred towards New York's system of tradition indicate that he has the tradition in himself. His consciousness is a flawed one for it is shaped by the same system which he resents.

There are some other examples in the novel which present the all-inclusive and controlling power of a city in an American society. One night, Newland ponders on his fiancée May Welland, who is a "terrifying product of the social system" (40; ch. 6), and his marriage: "and with a shiver of foreboding he saw his marriage becoming what most of the other marriages about him were: a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other" (41; ch. 6). He realizes that "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..." (42; ch. 6), and confesses to Ellen Olenska that "We're damnably dull. We've no character, no colour, no variety" (242; ch. 24). Mr. Beaufort's financial bankruptcy is another example of the point in case that influences other citizens as well and ruins hundreds of helpless people. These tribes of New York are so tightly knitted together in the historical and social context of New York, and so identify with social and cultural experiences and events that it seems they have similar fates and identities.

Newland's New York is an industrial capitalist society which enjoys technological and industrial inventions such as telephone, telegram, train, and whose people read newspaper and books and watch *The Shaughraun* play in Wallack's theater. Jean Frantz Blackall observes that Edith Wharton deploys telegrams and letters as another narrative strategy, and asserts that the letters of invitation in the novel "[serve] as an instrument of social *entrée*.... [And] attempts at letter-writing may lead to moments of insight or of self-discovery" (163). While waiting for the Washington express, Newland Archer remarks:

... there were people who thought there would one day be a tunnel under the Hudson through which the trains of the Pennsylvania railway would run straight into New York. They were of the brotherhood of visionaries who likewise predicted the building of ships that would cross the Atlantic in five days, the invention of a flying machine, lighting by electricity, telephonic communication without wires, and other Arabian Night marvels. (287; ch. 29)

Through this passage the writer describes technological developments which transformed a rural nation into a modern developed nation with new social, cultural and literary attitudes. Despite these technological progresses, Ned Winsett declares that "Culture! Yes—if we had it! But there are just a few little local patches, dying out here and there for lack of—well, hoeing and cross-fertilising: the last remnants of the old European tradition that your forebears brought with them" (124; ch. 14). He believes nothing is left of the gentleman trend in America, only "pictures on the walls of a deserted house" (ibid.). What is mourned here is the passing away of the cultural milieu of the old New York, portrayed at the beginning of the novel, and its replacement with a more technologized, more diverse and cosmopolitan one with less clearly-defined norms and values.

Now we come to the notions of family and marriage that have always played considerable roles in American society, especially during the era depicted in the novel, when, as Charles W. Gould points out "the very idea of 'nationality' was 'familial' in its essence" (qtd. in Michaels 119). Even today, Elizabeth Freeman reminds us, this concept is crucial:

As a component of U.S. kinship law, marriage sanctions particular sexual alliances, from which property relations are determined. It thereby defines a sphere of protected sexual and economic interests, whose exterior is marked by sexual 'deviance'. Yet as an aspect of modern emotional life in the United States, marriage is the ideological linchpin of intimacy—the most elevated form of chosen interpersonal relationship. Marriage is linked with national identity and citizenship. (152)

As for divorce, it "derived ... from a conviction that the only valid option for women were marriage or spinsterhood, and that having exercised the option of marriage one had to stick with it.... If to marry was the goal of a woman's life, to remarry was a form of promiscuousness" (Stephen Orgel, Introduction xi).

Family is the essential form of New York identity. Wharton presents three generations of orphaned children and broken families in *The Age of Innocence*. Old Mrs. Manson Mingott's father has abandoned his family and has disappeared mysteriously a long time ago. Now Mrs. Manson Mingott is the Matriarch of the line of Mingotts, and has married her two daughters to 'foreigners' who never came back to visit their mother. Mr. Beaufort is an ill-tempered Englishman with mysterious ancestors, who should not be introduced to and should not talk with unmarried girls, because he leads a life of luxury and illegal love affairs. After his scandalous bankruptcy, he elopes with his mistress and his illegitimate daughter. Ellen Olenska is an orphaned girl who has lived with childless Medora Manson abroad, and now back to New York, is regarded as a foreigner by her family who reject her idea of getting divorced. Though she is born in America, since she has rubbed shoulders with strangers and foreigners, she is not an American anymore; she is Europeanized and shunned by her family. As the examples indicate those with a dubious foreign origin are not reliable to New Yorkers. At the end of the novel, Fanny, Beaufort's illegitimate daughter, a third-generation-orphaned girl, is welcomed to a family by marrying Newland's son, Dallas. This marriage indicates the changed cultural atmosphere of New York, free from many of the restraining traditions of its past.

In *The Age of Innocence*, we read that the Mingotts and Mansons and all their clans had been the two fundamental families in New York, who were fond of eating, clothes and money, and the Archer-Newland-Van-der-Luyden were another family who cared about reading fiction, traveling and horticulture (31; ch. 5). Saving the family's dignity is what matters for these tribes. They make decisive decisions in *family council*; for instance, the family determines who should marry whom, or what should be done about those who spoil family's honor. Newland's marriage to May, "... being long foreseen by watchful relatives, had been carefully passed upon in family council" (26; ch. 4). This is what is determined for Newland, from which he cannot run away.

Old New York is a commercial city structured hierarchically like a pyramid. At its base are 'plain people' and families like Leffertses with dubious origins who "[are] raised above their level by marriage with one of the ruling clans" (46; ch. 6). Therefore, we can say that marriage is a means of moving in the society, from one class to another, whether upper or lower. At the top of the social scale are the dominant classes and ruling families like Mingotts and Newlands. Mrs. Archer remarks that their grandfathers were English or Dutch merchants who had come to the colonies in pursuit of their fortune. She continues that "One of [their] great-grandfathers signed the Declaration, and another was a general on Washington's staff, and received General Burgoyne's sword after the battle of Saratoga. These are things to be proud of, but they have nothing to do with *rank or class*" (47; ch. 6, emphasis added). By pointing out, or reminding, that, the (hi)story of many of these families goes back to the history of European immigrants to American industrial cities, to fortune-seekers the writer in fact stresses the culturally-constructed notions of social rank and class.

Furthermore, concerning the power of the family in America, as Carol J. Singley notes in *The Age of Innocence* "... social position is the result of a complex interplay of choice and circumstance, and that even the most static of societies is also dynamic, a fact apparent in Wharton's description of New York's leading families" (504). Singley continues that the aristocratic Van der Luydens possess social authority and "pardon or punish at times of social crisis" (ibid.). Through a dinner party they accept Ellen Olenska into society, and through another party they banish her from the society. The family decides that the two scandalous characters, Madam Olenska and Mr. Beaufort, should be ostracized. Madam Olenska's way of dressing, talking with married men and walking with Mr. Beaufort on the street are all scandalous to the Mingott family. The family cannot tolerate divorce and asks Newland to persuade Ellen Olenska to return to her husband. Ellen tells Newland that she gave up her divorcing, because "[he] showed [her] how selfish and wicked it was, how one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage (...) and to spare one's family the publicity, the scandal" (169; ch. 18). This passage represents the dominant ideology about family and marriage in Newland's New York, that family's honor is more important than the individual's freedom and happiness. Newland's society is a patriarchal which has little room for women's freedom and rights. The following quotation about the Archers displays the male authority in New York families:

Mother and daughter adored each other and revered their son and brother; and Archer loved them with a tenderness made compunctious and uncritical by the sense of their exaggerated admiration, and by his secret satisfaction in it. After all, he thought it a good thing for a man to have his authority respected in his own house, even if his sense of humor sometimes made him question the force of his mandate. (32; ch. 5)

In his conversation with Mr. Jackson about the case of Madam Olenska, Newland states that "Women ought to be free—as free as we are..." (39; ch. 5), while he knows that such 'verbal generosity' are only meaningless trifles to disguise the conventions and the hypocrisy which have paralyzed females' lives in this society. Elsewhere, pondering on his fiancée, he wonders "at what age 'nice' women begin to speak for themselves" (80; ch. 10), and immediately he answers "Never, if we won't let them ..." (ibid.).

In the case of Mr. Beaufort's financial misfortune, the family commands his expulsion. Mrs. Lovell Mingott observes that "In *their* day, the elder ladies agreed, the wife of a man who had done anything disgraceful in business had only one idea: to efface herself, to disappear with him" (276; ch. 27). A few lines later, Wharton remarks that "The mere idea of a woman's appealing to her family to screen her husband's business dishonor was inadmissible, since it was the one thing that the Family, as an institution, could not do" (277; ch. 27). The passages show, the power of family as a social institution in the 1870s New York and how it had the monopoly of deciding about the crucial matters like marriage and divorce in its members' lives.

At the end of her novel, Wharton implies that culture is not a set of static ideologies and values imposed on people, but rather, a process of dynamic and becoming principles that influence both individuals and society. Lisa Rado states that in cultural theory 'individual context' is important. By 'context', Rado means "the specific historical, environmental, and social circumstances in which a person or group of people are situated" (239). At the end, New York's social and ideological condition changes, and consequently, the culture of its citizens changes too. The scene of Newland and Ellen's meeting in the Art Museum exemplifies this. The glass shelves of the museum are full of "time-blurred" objects. While looking at these

objects, Ellen remarks that once these objects had been used by "forgotten people", and now how cruel it is to see them being labeled "Use unknown" (312; ch. 31). The museum with all its portraits and worn out objects represents the culture of the past people, which has declined and vanished many years ago. This scene foreshadows the decline of the civilization and culture of Newland's New York. Many years later, Newland realizes the fall of the culture and values once important to him and his family by seeing and hearing his son's (Dallas's) ideas and behavior. Dallas wants to marry Fanny, Beaufort's illegitimate daughter. Like Ellen Olenska, Fanny has lived in Europe, but, in contrast to Ellen, her return to New York does not excite people's suspicion and they take it for granted. Dallas and Fanny are, in the words of Waid and Colquitt (547), "the spiritual children of so many impulses and sacrifices, [whose] union consecrates the advent of an altered society in which former outlaws have become in-laws". Newland ponders "What [is] left of the little world he [has] grown up in, and whose standards [has] bent and bound him?" (355; ch. 34). Dallas is the representative of the new generation and "[has] the facility and self-confidence that [come] of looking at fate not as a master but as an equal" (361; ch. 34). New York is changed not only technologically (with the invention of telephone there is no need to messenger boys, and Newland can talk to his son across a long distance; electric lights and fast voyages no more surprise New Yorkers) but also culturally. Wharton's novel both represents this change and represents culture as change.

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