

EDITH WHARTON: SELF-ACTUALIZATION THROUGH
CHARACTERIZATION IN *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*

by

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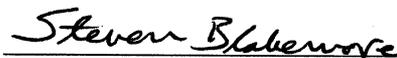
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Steven Blakemore, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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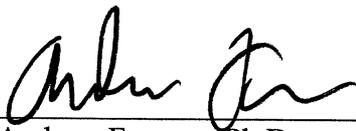
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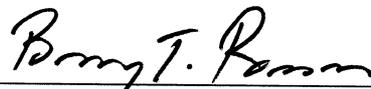
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ABSTRACT

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Edith Wharton uses characterization in the primary three characters in *The Age of Innocence* to explore the aspects of her life. Early adulthood is represented by May Welland Archer, who was born into New York 400, where society suppressed an individual's emotions, aspirations, and freedoms. The intermediate phase of her life is depicted in Newland Archer, who tests the confining limits of the society to which he belongs and strives to understand the role of emotions in achieving personal satisfaction. Wharton rejected and craved the ties of the New York 400 in the final phase of her life as portrayed in Ellen Olenska who left the 400, lived in Europe, and returned to New York. By developing these characters, Wharton attempts to retrospectively reconcile the transformations she experienced. Indeed, it will be clear that Wharton's work serves as a personal assessment of her self-actualization.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of my late family members: my grandfather, who exemplified hard work and left a legacy of grounded ambition; my grandmother, who earned her college degree at a time when most women did not; my great aunt, who encouraged my love of books and reading; and to my aunt, who shared with me her passion for the Latin language.

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I. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MAY WELLAND ARCHER

In order to contextualize Edith Wharton's life and work, it is helpful to understand the narrow, elite world of the New York 400 into which Wharton was born, the circumstances of her life, and the world around her in both America and Europe. Edith Wharton, born Edith Newbold Jones in 1862, was an aspiring writer from the earliest days of her childhood in New York City and often spent her time covertly poring over the volumes in her father's library. Her journey as a writer was a long, arduous one. It was not fashionable in the latter half of the nineteenth century for women to engage in any academic endeavors, including writing. However, Wharton wrote, even at times using remnants of wrapping paper from packages delivered to her home as her paper. When her family could no longer deny her ambition, they privately published a volume of some of her earliest works. Her topics and genres varied. Early on she wrote poems and narrative pieces as well as works that helped to define the standards for architecture and formal gardens. Her most prestigious professional acknowledgement was the receipt of the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *The Age of Innocence*. Wharton, the first female recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, was fifty-eight years old at the time of its publication. This retrospective novel depicts an intimate view of the lifestyle of New York society in the 1870s, the time during which Wharton was a young girl growing up in New York's upper crust society as a member of the elite New York 400.

The New York 400 was composed of members whose families had immigrated to America and lived in New York for several generations and whose financial security was established originally through the acquisition of real estate which was ultimately owned free and clear of any indebtedness. This economic stability allowed the male members to devote a large share of their lives to leisurely pursuits such as fishing, boating, and hunting, while working only the requisite minimum to acquire an education and appear somewhat productive. Women would dedicate their efforts to entertaining, attending theater, and ensuring the impenetrability of their group by anyone deemed unsuitable. The number 400 represents the original number of members in the elite crowd determined by the maximum number of fortunate guests who would be invited to attend the balls held in Mrs. Astor's private ballroom, the ultimate social occasion. During such formal gatherings, the refinement of manners, the practice of protocol, and the discussions about expulsion of non-conformists took place. Wharton often depicts the inner workings of the otherwise impenetrable New York 400 in many of her novels, including *The Age of Innocence*.

The primary characters in *The Age of Innocence* are Newland Archer, a successful lawyer, and his fiancée, May Welland, a prim and demure lady, both of whom were bred to conform to the rigid, unyielding standards promulgated by the society of which they were members. Relationships become complicated when the reader learns that Newland has had a previous affair with a very married Mrs. Rushworth. This revelation about his character and his propensity to break rules foreshadows his future romantic involvement with May's married but separated cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska, while he is engaged to May. This triangulation provides

material that is examined differently by each of the three individuals involved. These three divergent viewpoints shed light on how the intimate circle of friends and relations in the New York 400 come together to manage the very civil and polite dismissal of Olenska from the group by hosting her going-away party. May also announces her pregnancy to Newland so that he will continue with their engagement and abandon his relationship with Olenska. It is the expected maneuverings of the characters that Wharton portrays in the novel as well as the actions of primary characters themselves which garner so much attention and generate so much controversy about the functioning and effect of the New York elite.

While the inner workings of the New York 400 are preeminently important in *The Age of Innocence* itself, it is necessary to contextualize the novel in order to consider a wider view of the world as it existed in the nineteenth century. By the decade of the 1870s, the setting of *The Age of Innocence*, men had been harvesting gold in California, and there was a great westward migration of people by ship in search of their fortunes. However, the discovery of gold also created the need for alternative forms of transportation to move both people and equipment to California. The construction of the Transcontinental Railroad was well underway, and the construction created jobs for many laborers who gladly emigrated from other countries for the chance to have a steady job and a beginning in a new land. These jobs, however, were extraordinarily dangerous and difficult.

As construction of the tracks progressed westward, laborers encountered rugged terrain through mountainous regions, long stretches of arid land through the desert, and Native American Indians who defended their lands against invasions. Weather also

presented challenges, including life-threatening heat in the south, blizzards along the northern lines, and floods in the spring. Many men lost their lives along the way. At times workers would strike for more pay due to the hazardous working conditions.

Meanwhile, in the cities banks loaned vast sums of money to entrepreneurs of the day, and the government donated parcels of land to contribute to the success of exploration and development of lands west of the Mississippi River. Many businessmen were suddenly newly rich during these boom times. Various classes of citizenry mixed company on completed rail lines unexpectedly when snow delayed and stranded trains in remote areas of the country. Fortunes were quickly made and lost. There was an economic crisis in September of 1873 that resulted in a rush on the banks in New York that financed the construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad and resulted in the banks being closed for several days. Many of these volatile and rapidly changing conditions were taking place in the city where Wharton was safely ensconced in her elite New York society.

In addition, while juxtaposing those people and forces that lead to westward exploration, railroad construction, and substantial economic investments of the period with the stasis and leisure of the New York 400, it is also important to assimilate biographical information about the author whose early life took place at the convergence of these various factors in existence during the 1870s. The fiercely private Wharton provides some of the earliest insights into her life in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, published in 1933, at a time when many of her friends and relatives were still living. Perhaps this accounts for the nature of her work in general, which documents her coming out experience, her feelings about writing, her multiple homes,

her marriage, her European travels, and her volunteerism in France during World War I. At times Wharton's autobiography appears to be an emotionally sterile accounting of Who's Who in New York, Europe, and literary circles, including lists of who she visited, what the home was like, and how long she stayed. What is conspicuously missing are the many emotionally charged events and relationships in her life.

Wharton had contentious relationships with both of her much older brothers, Frederic, "Freddy," and Henry, "Harry." Initially relations between Wharton and Harry were amicable until Harry divorced his wife, Minnie, to pursue what started as an adulterous relationship with another woman. Wharton sided with Minnie and disapproved of her brother's decision to divorce. Subsequently, Wharton had difficult relationships with both of her brothers after her mother, Lucretia, passed away leaving her estate evenly divided between her two sons with Wharton only receiving benefits from a trust during her lifetime. The will was contested legally, and perhaps the greatest loss was that of harmonious relations between siblings. In keeping with the tradition established in the society of her childhood, Wharton was not forthcoming about any of these events. Public appearance was paramount.

Similarly, while the factual events surrounding Wharton's marriage to Edward Wharton are well documented, there is no indication of the loveless and childless marriage she endured. In fact, the first ten years of her marriage were plagued with depression and unhappiness. During that time, however, Wharton continued to write even though her works were not published for years to come. It is through her fiction that well-informed readers may glean some of the circumstances of her personal life as depicted cathartically in her characters. Wharton does not discuss her extramarital affair

with Morton Fullerton in her autobiography, either by reference or directly. While some believe it is out of a sense of respect for those still living at the time, it is also because it would be against the strict code of elite New York society from which she tried to break free and yet which was still so evident in many of her actions.

While there are multitudinous biographies written about Wharton, the most authoritative biography is *Edith Wharton, a Biography*, written by R. W. B. Lewis, which was published in 1975. This comprehensive work presents an accumulation of Wharton background materials up to that time and adds information from the letters most recently released by Wharton's family. This new material adds pieces to the mosaic that comprises Wharton's life. When Wharton was terminally ill, she had many of her personal letters destroyed. Most of the newly released correspondence survived because those she corresponded with had preserved the letters. Readers gain additional insight into Wharton's publishing and writing life, as well as some of her personal relationships with fellow writers, including Henry James. Gradually, various aspects of Wharton's personal and private lives begin to fit together.

Cynthia Wolff's Wharton biography appeared in 1977, shortly after the 1975 authorized biography penned by Lewis. The defining difference is that Wolff bases much of her work on Wharton's then recently discovered love diary as a mature, sixty-two-year-old woman reflecting on her life rather than on writings made contemporaneously with the events they describe. This work describes Wharton as a timeless, strong female whose isolation is due to the absence of beauty, passion, and danger while growing up in the insular world of New York society. Wharton, in *The Age of Innocence*, finally focuses on sexual tensions and energy. This reflects her

personal struggles to balance the desire to pursue her writing while also maintaining her femininity, something that was not possible during her marriage.

After a lull in Wharton studies, the gender critics of the 1990s reignited interest in Wharton's works, her person, and her life. In 1994 Shari Benstock, professor of English at the University of Miami, published another Wharton biography entitled *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton*. Benstock's intention was to write a biography with the correct tone and acclaim that she felt had been previously denied to Wharton because of her gender. This work chronicles Wharton's transcendence from an intimidated seventeen-year-old debutante to a self-assured and accomplished author and scholar, complete with a full range of emotions and tribulations. A picture emerges of a determined, unrelenting, hard-working woman who struggles to and partially succeeds in breaking the ties to a society that attempted to subvert and stifle her creative genius.

None of the interim Wharton biographies contributed significantly to the nexus between her life and her work, although the next "definitive" biography, *Edith Wharton* (2007), by Hermione Lee, professor of English literature at Oxford University, needs to be addressed. This comprehensive work includes new resources and portrays Wharton neither as an arrogant aristocrat nor as a tortured soul. Instead, many pieces of Wharton's life are blended together to reveal a very modern, intelligent, and multi-faceted woman who was steadfast to friends and her work as well as a grounded and generous contributor to families affected by World War I. Lee describes Henry James as Wharton's peer rather than her mentor. Lee also emphasizes Wharton's varied interests, including gardening, architecture, and cultural studies. This biography recounts Wharton's affair with Fullerton more fully than any of the prior biographies based on

the love diary Wharton kept during that time, something that provides nuanced details that allows correlation between various aspects of her personal life and the characters she develops in her works, specifically *The Age of Innocence*.

Although Wharton struggled to break free from the ties that bound her to the rigid and oppressive rules that governed the lifestyles and attitudes of the New York 400, some of the thought patterns and values were so deeply engrained that they affected her throughout her life. Wharton traveled extensively throughout Europe, including to Greece, Italy, and France. Her passion for writing was considered to be a masculine occupation and something for the very learned, a section of the population that was shunned generally by Wharton's elite childhood society. Nevertheless, Wharton persisted and was well received in the influential circles of European society—a welcome change from being forced to “make up” stories in her mind or write covertly on scraps of paper in New York. She broke another tenet of her childhood society when she sought a divorce from Teddy Wharton after a long, unhappy, and unfruitful marriage. Even though she was living in France at the time of the divorce and her case was adjudicated in the French court system, she was still an American citizen and still a descendent of the Jones family of the New York 400, the very Jones family whose standards so many sought to emulate.

The totality of all the biographical information about Wharton as it became available over time allows one to more fully understand not only the constraints under which she lived for many years because of her parents and the society into which she was born, but it also demonstrates the extreme measures she took to overcome the constrictions in order to create and live her life on her own terms, something that was

nearly unheard of in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is precisely this progressive and forward-thinking attitude that also caused Wharton to portray some of the innermost workings of New York society in the plots and characters of her works.

Much Wharton criticism since the 1970s focuses on gender issues, including opinions about the misogynistic treatment of women in *The Age of Innocence*.

However, in the love diary which Wharton kept about her affair with Fullerton when she was thirty-seven, she points out specifically gender differences with regard to physical and mental relationships between men and women. Many of Wharton's writings in the diary describe her journey from being emotionally imprisoned to being passionately consummated. This facet of Wharton's life was very private to her; however, Fullerton wanted to dispel the myth that Wharton was frigid. Fullerton's desire to speak publicly about the affair was quashed due to Wharton's fear of judgment by the New York society of her youth. In fact, Wharton was so determined to keep her affair a secret that this resulted in large gaps in her diary, including the period of time when her relationship with Fullerton first became intimate.

Audrey Rodgers, in her article "Images of Women: A Female Perspective," discusses how Wharton places distance between herself and her heroines so as to only minimally expose her own conflicts. Rodgers also describes women as being unable to transcend their roles as breeders, ornaments, or submissive wives. Other gender criticism specifically addresses the two divergent roles of women: one as the conventional model and the other as the progressive, unconventional intruder, as depicted by the arrival of Olenska, the divorcing intruder from Europe who comes between Newland and May, the engaged couple in *The Age of Innocence*. Carol

Weishoven posits, in her article, “Old New York and the Valley of Childish Things: *The Age of Innocence*, The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton,” that Olenska’s outspoken manner simultaneously disrupts the status quo of New York society while exhilarating and frightening its members. This seems very likely in light of New York society’s stringent standards and Olenska’s more relaxed European customs.

Women are also critiqued as being chattel, traded and marketed like a commodity in order to preserve the patriarchal system. Linette Davis develops this idea in “Vulgarity and Red Blood in *The Age of Innocence*.” Young girls are at the center of this paradigm in that they are marketed between men, from fathers to future husbands. Olenska disrupts existing social codes because she refuses to be the silent woman. Olenska has sexual knowledge and a complete lack of social graces and protocol while May possesses the opposite. The forthright and outspoken Olenska is excluded from New York society while the compliant May, who remains silent, is accepted.

Not all critics agree, however, on the significance of women’s silence in *The Age of Innocence*. Clare Eby contends that while silence is a feminist issue, a kind of imposed repression that transcends historical periods, she encourages an examination of silences as a means of potential freedom for females. Complex communication takes place in the novel through unspoken means. While those comprising New York society never verbally condemn Newland’s affair with Olenska, they instead sponsor a going-away party for her. When May tries to suggest to Newland that he is free to cancel their engagement, Newland silences her because such outspokenness violates both feminine and social codes.

Critics also discuss the role of Newland Archer as an unsatisfactory man. In the New York 400, neither gender escapes critiquing. David Holbrook explains in his book, *Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man*, that Newland has two affairs, contrary to social and moral codes. Once he kisses Olenska, Newland states that he can no longer marry May, yet he does. This contradictory behavior causes Newland to lose credibility. Once Newland is able to pursue a relationship with Olenska after May's death, he does not do so. The implication is that it was the illicit nature of the relationship that was appealing to Newland rather than his true love for Olenska. Wharton attributes defective character traits to both men and women.

While this review of criticism is by no means exhaustive of gender issues, the sampling lays the basic premise for the possible roles of women and men in *The Age of Innocence*. My contribution to current criticism will be to use historical and biographical approaches to draw direct corollaries between Wharton's personal experiences in her life and the three main characters involved in the love triad in *The Age of Innocence*: Newland Archer, May Welland, and Countess Ellen Olenska. Rather than posing general representations about gender roles, Wharton uses characters of both genders to represent different facets of her life as well as the interior struggles she experienced as she strives to break the ties that bind her to an insular, elite society whose oppressive ideas and attenuated thoughts stifle the natural longing she has for self-expression, self-actualization, and self-confidence which she ultimately accomplishes in her life.

Wharton portrays the roles of men and women in the New York 400, and she deconstructs the flaws of both genders. In this context and contrary to current Wharton

criticism, I will demonstrate that Wharton does not intend for her work to be a study in gender differences. In addition, I will crystallize and correct another misconception, showing that Wharton is not concerned about the interactive effects of different classes generally. Instead, she writes about a subject she knows very well: how life within the anthropological and cultural walls of the elite society of the New York 400 influences and represses the ambitions of its members. These walls transcend the physical location of the community in New York City; in fact, the social and moral restrictions permeate the minds and hence the worldviews of the 400 members, influencing them through their lives, even long after the society itself becomes extinct.

The honest depiction of character traits in the three primary characters in *The Age of Innocence* allows Wharton to examine various aspects of her life's journey through different stages, including the debutante, May Welland, who mirrors Wharton's own coming out and ensuing wedding; the foreign, outspoken Countess Ellen Olenska, reminiscent of Wharton's affair with Fullerton while she was residing in France and seeking a divorce from her husband; and Newland Archer—even the male character—who is legally and morally obligated to someone by marriage while longing to be with another. Indeed, it is the most sensitive and the most potentially objectionable of all of Wharton's character traits by New York 400 standards that she distances herself to the greatest extent by representing her own amorous desires in Newland Archer, the male character of the trio. My contribution, in short, will be to illuminate precisely how biography intersects and interacts with Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* in ways that critics and scholars have overlooked or ignored.

II. MAY WELLAND ARCHER: DEBUTANT TO NEW BRIDE

Edith Wharton wrote her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Age of Innocence*, shortly after the end of World War I, and it was published in 1920. At that time Wharton had been living as an expatriate in France for more than a decade and had been actively involved in assisting in the war effort by setting up various charitable organizations that would house and clothe refugees who fled to Paris from the countryside. Her philanthropic organizations also helped to provide care for patients who were infected during the outbreak of tuberculosis. The war years were very exhausting, both mentally and physically, and Wharton was eager to return to her everyday pre-war routine, particularly the habit of devoting each full morning to her writing. Her feeling was that “after an incomparably greater cleavage from everything she had known and been, she summoned her energies to a far greater act of reconciliation” (Lewis 425). It is with this idea of retrospective synthesis that she began to craft her first post-war novel.

At the time she wrote *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton was fifty-seven years old and a product of many changes during her lifetime, both those she expected and others that were completely unanticipated. Wharton had married Teddy Wharton, a peer in the elite New York 400 society. It seemed like a perfect pairing. The marriage, however, began with a disastrous consummation experience. Rather than physical intimacy, the Whartons shared companionship and a love for travel, so together they explored Europe, Africa, Spain, and the Baltic. Wharton established a prolific career as a writer

after an initial lull during the first ten years of her marriage. Her love of European culture and history caused her to spend increasingly more time in France, where she surrounded herself with a close circle of friends, many of whom were male writers. This practice was much more widely accepted in France than in Wharton's native New York, so Wharton remained in France where she enjoyed being surrounded by the camaraderie of like-minded artists. Wharton's friendship with Morton Fullerton, a native of New England who was living and working as a reporter in France, developed into a passionate extramarital affair where for the first time, in her mid-forties, Wharton experienced the intimate physical pleasures she had never known. Over time, Wharton learned that Fullerton was a bisexual man with a long history of escapades in both the United States and Europe. Meanwhile, Teddy was having a series of his own trysts, which were due in part to the manic cycle of his bipolar condition. Ultimately, Wharton's affair with Fullerton ended, and Teddy's adventures ceased. Their marriage ended in divorce. In the aftermath of the world war and her personal challenges, Wharton was ready to return to the peace of her home and to the world of fiction.

For years Wharton used the setting of the New York 400 for many of her works. In fact, early in her career she used actual people from that society as the basis for her fictional characters with just enough alteration from real events to avoid the problem of any of her friends or relatives identifying themselves in her work. As Wharton's career progressed and she became more successful, her fictional characters were often based on her own personal experiences and emotions rather than those of others. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Wharton addresses her method of character development directly. She explains she used her "experience, observation, the looks and

ways and words of ‘real people’, all melted and fused in the white heat of the creative fires . . .” (212). This process continued up to and including *The Age of Innocence*, where I will demonstrate that the three primary characters in the love triad—May Welland, Newland Archer, and Ellen Olenska—each represents a different and distinct aspect of Wharton’s life as it evolved with experience over time.

The character of May Welland, a young engaged lady in New York’s elite society, parallels Wharton’s early years where social decorum was paramount. Both Welland and Wharton were steeped in the rigid tenets and social correctness that comprised the backbone of their society. These tenets included maintaining the outward appearance of dignity at all times, both in private and business matters. The men were well educated, and the women did not attend college. Instead women filled their time by engaging in needlework, paying social calls, and following fashion. While this class generally enjoyed reading literature, it was regarded as primarily a masculine pursuit. There was no provision that allowed for women to enjoy reading literature, and certainly there was no space for either women or men to write. Paradoxically, Wharton points out the inconsistencies in the group by saying, “. . . though they held literature in great esteem, [they] stood in nervous dread of those who produced it” (*Backward* 68). The members worked together to avoid any unpleasantness through various methods, including comporting themselves properly, banding together for support, never verbalizing anything unbecoming, and timing events so as to distract attention away from anything that one would not want to publicize.

In *The Age of Innocence*, the announcement of May’s engagement to be married to Newland is accelerated to coincide with the arrival of May’s unconventional and

worldly cousin, Ellen Olenska, and deflects potentially damaging attention away from the Wellands, thereby protecting their honor and good standing in society, which may otherwise be impugned by Ellen's shocking behavior. Although Ellen was originally a member of the New York 400, she left, married a foreign count, became accustomed to much more liberal European practices, and intended to reestablish herself in New York while she pursued a divorce from her husband—all of which were shocking violations of the prevailing social codes. Newland acquiesces to May's desire to announce their engagement early but voices his disappointment by saying that he wished that “the necessity of their action had been represented by some ideal reason, and not simply by poor Ellen Olenska” (*Age* 16). Similarly, Wharton married Teddy rather hurriedly after a broken engagement to Harry Stevens and her failure to respond to her friend, Walter Berry's, overtures, an event I will discuss later. This decision was based largely on the idea that “Edith found herself entering her twenty-fourth year, dangerously close to the age beyond which the young women of her set became steadily less marriageable” (Lewis 52). Wharton's sudden wedding was undoubtedly intended to deflect attention away from her prior inability to arrange a suitable marriage.

Both Welland and Wharton are both masterful at maintaining a public appearance as though everything is as expected in their relationships, even when quite the contrary is true. Of course, this behavior has its roots in the social expectations of the New York society to which they both belong. May comes to realize more than a year after her marriage to Newland that he is still preoccupied with and desirous of Ellen, May's flamboyant cousin who is a returning member of the New York 400 and who is seeking a divorce from her husband. Although Newland repeatedly tries to stay

true to his wife, images of Ellen occupy his mind. Newland makes a trip to Boston on the pretense of business but in actuality to meet with Ellen. When Newland announces to May his plan to go to D.C. on a subsequent trip, Ellen's current place of residence, May never confronts Newland directly about his ongoing desire for Ellen. Instead, she places the emphasis on the familial relation, which would make the visit seem socially acceptable, and says, "The change will do you good . . . and you must be sure to go and see Ellen" (*Age* 161). This is precisely the application of the code that keeps anything unpleasant under the surface.

Wharton exemplified the same techniques of avoiding distastefulness in her personal life as well. When Wharton's husband, Teddy, experienced a decline in his mental health, he was unable to manage her money and their home in America while she was in Paris. In fact, Teddy admitted that he had "speculated with \$50,000 of her money, had lost a good deal of it, and had bought an apartment in Boston and set up a mistress in it" (*Lee* 373). This was the culmination of an ongoing problem that had existed for years. Wharton decided that her husband must be removed as trustee in order to protect her assets; however, it was important to maintain public appearances. Wharton allowed Teddy to continue to reside in their home in America, revoked his power to conduct business on her behalf, and paid him a monthly stipend so that everything would seem to be the same topically, when in fact everything was very different.

The way in which both women maintain public appearances in no way suggests, however, that they are naïve or unaware. It is very shortly after Ellen returns to New York and prior to May's marriage to Newland that May demonstrates privately that she

is aware of Newland's change in behavior and perhaps a change in his desires as well. She confronts her future husband directly and privately—a bold move for her class—and plainly asks, “. . . is there someone else?” (*Age* 92). By posing this question, May reveals that her prior silence does not equate with ignorance. Her question to Newland is bolstered by her pointing out to him that “You musn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices—one has feelings and ideas” (*Age* 93). Once Newland assures May that he intends to honor his pledge to her, May reverts again to the more reserved method of non-verbal communication by using her eyes to express emotion. This is evident when her eyes become “full of happy tears” (Fracasso 45). Only during the most extreme circumstances is the method of brief, direct conversation employed, and then only in private settings.

When Wharton's marriage to Teddy became intolerable, she orchestrated events to minimize public scandal while simultaneously being certain to achieve the outcome she desired: a divorce. During the early years, Wharton lived in a sexless marriage but did not ask for a divorce, since divorce did not comport with the standards of moral rectitude acceptable to the New York 400. She forgave Teddy for squandering her money and having multiple extramarital affairs. She also tried to be patient and helpful during the escalation of Teddy's bipolar disorder, including hiring help for him and sending him for treatment at various facilities. Ultimately, Wharton decided to file for divorce in Paris rather than America “to avoid publicity, since reporters were not allowed access to the court proceedings or reports” (Lee 399). In order to divorce in Paris, Wharton had to prove Teddy's adultery, which would form the basis for the divorce. Consequently, Wharton hired investigators to gather evidence of her husband's

affairs. When Teddy returned to Paris, he “was immediately served with a court citation; twenty-four hours later [her] divorce was settled” (Benstock 277). Clearly Wharton was patient, tolerant, and kind in her dealings with Teddy over the course of their marriage. She was not, however, weak, naïve, or indecisive at times when difficult decisions and actions became necessary.

While the individual members of the New York society function well within the codes, the preeminent function of the New York 400 is to unite to protect the existence of their small group. The well-respected, aristocratic van der Luydens, arbiters of decorum, lend support to Ellen’s attempt to reenter society by inviting her to dinner—a non-verbal cue for all members to follow. For a short time society members try to dissuade Ellen from violating social conventions by pursuing her divorce. Many other members are willing to overlook her going to visit with artists, musicians, and writers on Sunday afternoons; even though society enjoyed the arts, there was an unspoken prohibition against mingling with the creative set. However, eventually it becomes apparent that Ellen’s behavior threatens to disrupt the marriage of two society members: May and Newland Archer. Therefore, the initial reception of Ellen rapidly transforms into a decision to expel her, and the members of old New York rally around May as she announces her pregnancy before she is even certain of it herself. May then hosts a farewell dinner for Ellen prior to her moving back to Europe. This successful group maneuver takes on an increased significance when May scores “a triumph that the van der Luydens, at May’s request, should have stayed over in order to be present at her farewell dinner for the Countess Olenska” (*Age* 196). Just as the societal gatekeepers

allow Ellen to attempt to return to the fold, they just as quickly expel her when she fails to transition back to the old standards and instead threatens the integrity of the group.

Even though Wharton did not live her entire life within the narrow confines of New York and the New England vacation setting associated with New York society, she often utilized the tools she learned during her childhood to manage her own personal difficulties wherever they occurred. Shortly after her wedding, Wharton realized that her sexual life with her husband was not satisfactory and that it was very likely that Teddy had inherited mental illness, in the form of bipolar disease, from his father. The combination caused Wharton to live in a depressed state for the first ten years of her marriage. These threats to her marriage and the resulting unhappiness were cause for Wharton to look outside the marriage for emotional support, intellectual conversations, adventure, encouragement, and entertainment. She surrounded herself with a large group of faithful servants and, more importantly, dear friends. Wharton had many friendships that spanned several decades. Walter Berry was a Harvard-educated attorney who was a friend from early adulthood and, according to Wharton, “the love of all my life” (Benstock 49). Paul Bourget, a French poet, was a very devoted friend and travel companion of Wharton. Henry James was a dedicated companion who opined that Wharton’s marriage was “utterly inconceivable” (Benstock 55). It is Wharton’s personal backstory that she transfigured to form the underpinnings of May’s invoking the social codes of the New York set to help her maintain the rigid expectations of faithfulness and honor. Wharton biographer, R. W. B. Lewis, points out that some of Wharton’s early writings were so close to her personal situation that she would not release them. Instead, her objective became “to render versions of her experience

translated, so to speak, rather than copied” (87). This is precisely the case with her depictions of the marshaling of forces when faced with extraordinary personal challenges.

Once the requisite manners of the New York 400 were instilled in its members, they were a continuous influence whether one was in New York, New England, or traveling through Europe. During the travels Archer and May make to Europe on their honeymoon, May is unable to allow for any traditional differences of local practices and customs. After a very protracted consideration about what to wear and what to discuss with others, May is well dressed, but her “way of showing herself at ease with foreigners was to become more uncompromisingly local in her references, so that, though her loveliness was an encouragement to admiration, her conversation was a chill to repartee” (*Age* 121). This is coupled with a complete rejection of the French tutor, M. Riviere, who intrigues Newland so much that Newland considers helping him find employment in New York. May counters that he is very common and suggests that “[t]hose people are always awkward in society” (*Age* 123). The well-entrenched New York training makes it nearly impossible for any outsider to approach May and engage in a meaningful conversation.

Wharton was also accustomed to the traditional values she learned as a child in New York. The same manners that were so well received in the narrow community of her youth often caused her to seem aloof, snobby, and distant to acquaintances who did not know her well. There were many “[s]tories of Edith’s chilly relations with the nouveau riche,” and others felt that she had “always rather gone out of her way to be rude to people” (Lee 153). Bernard Berenson was a good friend of Wharton’s for many

years, but his wife, Mary, disliked Wharton at their first meeting due to her aloof and distant demeanor. It was not until their second meeting years later that Berenson's wife, Mary, "spent time with Edith and revised her unfavorable impression from their first meeting" (Benstock 259). Still other members of her own community who would have been appreciative of her well-bred manners were upset when they felt they had been models for characters which were included in Wharton's stories. Not all of Wharton's ideas of manners and customs evolved over time; however, many of her personal attributes had to undergo change in order for her to maximize her personal satisfaction as well as to improve her professional reception with her editors and her readership.

I contend that while *May* represents the earliest of Wharton's days when she comported with society's edicts as a debutant and new bride, complete with all the challenges that may never be addressed overtly, she is not merely representative of all of her class. Thus I disagree with R. B. Dooley who, in "A Footnote to Edith Wharton," suggests that *May* "is deliberately made such a perfect and typical product of her background that on Fifth Avenue of the 1870's one might well have met her in every well-bred young lady rather than in any one individual" (80). That may seem accurate if one were to view *May* as a snapshot in time. Instead, *May* represents the seminal seed from which Wharton emerged and evolved. Although Wharton does not reveal to her readers the long-term intricacies of the marriage of *May* and *Newland*, she does use other characters to represent the stages of the evolution of her cultural and social attitudes as well as the professional aspect of life. The progression of Wharton's development is depicted in the characters of *Newland Archer* and *Ellen Olenska*, in successive order.

Wharton's use of her personal upbringing in a largely cloistered elite society allows us a brief insight into the inner workings and culture embodied in the New York 400. The existence of this class was doomed to extinction due to the suppression of personal emotions, creative interests, and individual freedoms. In addition, the increasing number of *nouveau riche* who sought to penetrate the barriers of this society was a large threat to its continuity. The impact of World War I changed attitudes and value systems globally. Once the New York 400 ceased to exist, Wharton's work became in many ways a literary, sociological manifestation of the complicated and nuanced world of the 400. May is the stereotypical debutant and domesticated wife; however, she is not merely the superficially compliant person she demonstrates to the public. She manifests many additional traits of desire, observance, manipulation, intuition, and socialization that combine to create a powerful force within the confines of New York society.

While May is Wharton's depiction of her early years in New York, this character represents only one facet of the complex person Wharton became. To have a complete and clear vision of the fully mature Wharton, one must also examine the characters of Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska. Just as May exemplifies Wharton's early life, Newland Archer represents the intermediate stage in the evolution of Edith Wharton.

III. NEWLAND ARCHER: YOUNG ADULTHOOD TO MIDDLE AGE

Newland Archer, the protagonist in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, is the most complex character in the novel. His childhood in old New York is suffused with the requirements of society, yet he consistently struggles to understand his place in that social order as well as in the world at large. His ambivalence, uncertainty, and struggle provide ample fuel for literary critics, who offer a wide range of interpretations of his character, such as Wharton biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff who asserts that he is merely a young man coming of age (306), and Emily J. Orlando who argues that he is a man who is simply ineffective and riddled with flaws (57). However, when one views Newland from the perspective that he represents a healthy psychological aspect of Wharton herself, a young person – regardless of gender—who is unwilling to accept a society that stifles the human spirit and instead chooses to test and challenge the imposed constrictions to which she is subjected in order to determine which ones are significant enough to abide by and which ones are erroneous and may be discarded, the truest picture of Wharton herself crystalizes.

It is widely accepted that throughout her work Wharton based her fictional characters on the community, culture, and people with whom she was most familiar, but as one biographer points out, “Edith denied that she had taken her subjects direct from real life, but there are many clear echoes of people and events” (Benstock 359). It becomes clear that the most intimate and often most uncomfortable struggles that Wharton experienced are portrayed in a manner that is seemingly most distant from her

personal life. In her psychological approach, Wolff suggests “good art must grow organically out of the deepest fathoms of the artist’s own experience [. . .] The artist’s courage lies in his ability to plunge into these recesses and to confront his most secret self” (9). In this case, the distance between the artist and her art is achieved by portraying the struggle to break free from the bonds of cultural indoctrination in the character of a man, Newland Archer. Wharton simultaneously discloses autobiographical elements about her childhood and disguises them in her fictional account by presenting them in a masculine character. Wharton was fiercely private and careful to distance herself from any connection her readers might have made between her life and her writing. Yet clearly Wharton first links herself to Newland by choosing a name very similar to her middle maiden name, Newbold, only a slight variation of a name which linked her, in turn, to her maternal aunt and godmother, Mrs. Thomas H. Newbold (Lewis 5). Of course this name is also removed one step further from the name of Edith Wharton, the name by which she was known at the time she created the character of Newland. Although Wharton strove to become the person she aspired to be, it is important to note that both men and women alike strained against the limitations and dictates of their community.

Wharton introduces Newland Archer as a young man who is about to announce his engagement to May Welland. While most young adults experience turbulent times during their transition from adolescence to early adulthood—the precise phase of life Newland is in at the beginning of the novel—the additional constraints and expectations of the circumscribed New York 400 cause myriad issues that transcend the normal progression of maturation. Wolff asserts *The Age of Innocence* is a *bildungsroman* and

points out that “Archer longs for a life that moves well beyond the charted realms of the familiar, a life of high emotional intensity and sustained moral and intellectual complexity” (424). Newland often pacifies this longing by spending time in a library and using his imagination in conjunction with his readings to contemplate a different life. May defends his seemingly odd habit by explaining that “When there’s nothing particular to do he reads a book” (*Age* 135). After decades of research and exploration of some of Wharton’s remaining personal letters and her diary, scholars understand more clearly the autobiographical nature of her works; however, Wharton’s contemporary readers would not have been able to see the direct correlation between the author and her characters. Throughout the novel, Wharton imbues Newland with these longings; however, it is clear that many of the aspirations and desires the reader sees in Newland are equally attributable to both men and women in this oppressive society. In fact, women were even more repressed than men. Wharton conveys that it is inherently unnatural for people of either gender generally, and for her specifically, to have to perpetually subdue and deny their desire for intellectual and emotional development and expression.

One of the most consistent traits that Wharton portrays through Newland is his open-minded views about the arts. Early on Wharton reveals that Newland “felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility [. . .] he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world than any other man of the number” (*Age* 6). The very same circumstances apply to Wharton herself, as a product of the same society about which she wrote. For several years during her childhood, her family lived in Europe. That experience formed the

backdrop against which Wharton would contrast her life in New York. She speaks of the recognition of this contrast in her autobiography: “I did not know how deeply I had felt the nobility and harmony of the great European cities till our steamer was docked at New York” (*Backward* 44). Wharton’s subsequent attempts at conforming to the dictates of New York society were always tinged with rich memories of her years in Europe.

These feelings of dissatisfaction with a New York society that was becoming increasingly obsolete contributed to both Newland and Wharton seeking to escape and find solace in their libraries and books. Archer thoroughly enjoys moving into his new home with May, especially settling into the library. He engages in “the abiding occupation and interest of arranging his new library, which in spite of family doubts and disapprovals, had been carried out as he had dreamed” (*Age* 125). For Newland, the library is more than just a room for books; it is a private place for imagining and expressing thoughts and emotions that are not otherwise publicly accepted. One evening Newland declines multiple dinner invitations to unpack “[. . .] his books from London. The box was full of things he had been waiting for impatiently [. . .] but though he turned the pages with the sensuous joy of the book-lover, he did not know what he was reading” (*Age* 87). Critics often point to this scene to exemplify Newland’s shortcomings. For example, one critic correctly observes that “Ellen proves herself a much more deft reader than Archer and she brings this skill to their every exchange” (Orlando 67). Yet a comparison of the aspirations of Newland and Wharton to understand complex texts reveals a direct correlation between the intellectual development of both Wharton and Newland. Because Newland represents an earlier

period in Wharton's life, his character is not expertly skilled or fully developed as a reader. Chronologically speaking, Ellen Olenska, the character who represents the last period in Wharton's life, is the more experienced, fully actualized reader, writer, and person.

When Wharton was very young, she was an avid learner. In fact, she enjoyed creating stories that “combined intense imaginative and sensual pleasures” and “divided her time between improvising tales and reading books that her mother judged appropriate for her” (Benstock 20-21). Wharton's craving for knowledge was not well accepted by her parents or by the community and was deemed to be manly. However, she persisted in her pursuit to read and learn. In the early years, Wharton looked for ways to awaken her imagination, and describes, “My imagination lay there, coiled and sleeping, a mute, hibernating creature, and at the least touch of common things—flowers, animals, words, especially the sound of words, [. . .] it already stirred in its sleep and then sank back into its own rich dream, which needed so little feeding from the outside” (*Backward* 4). This awakening of her imagination and dedication to learning resulted in Wharton's compilation of 24 poems—written between the ages of 13 and 15—being privately published. At the same time, she received a check for \$50 for the publication of her translation of a German poem, which had to be published under her friend's father's name, E. A. Washburn (Benstock 35-36). Despite these early successes, Wharton remained very shy, isolated, and unsure of both her ability and her work. Like *Newland*, however, she persevered in her work.

Wharton uses the library as a sanctuary, a place for private musings and imaginings, for retreating from the realities of the external world, and for making up the

lives which both she and Newland were too young to actualize. The importance of the library is highlighted early in the work when Newland arrived to the theater just as the curtain is rising because he had lingered “over a cigar in the Gothic library” (*Age* 4). Newland helps Mr. Jackson to “an armchair near the fire in the Gothic library” while they exchanged information about Countess Ellen Olenska (*Age* 27). Wharton reiterates the significance of Newland’s library when “his only comfort was to reflect that [May] would probably let him arrange his library as he pleased” after their marriage (*Age* 46). Indeed once Newland is married, his increasing need to imagine a life other than the one he is living causes him to spend more and more time sequestered in the emotional safety of the imaginary world he creates in his library.

Particularly in the second half of *The Age of Innocence*, Newland often retreats to the quiet solitude of a library. After meeting Ellen in Boston, he returns to the club and sits “alone in the deserted library, turning and turning over his thoughts” (*Age* 149). Mr. Jackson and Newland withdraw “to the Gothic library” to contemplate the possible effects of Beaufort’s impending financial collapse on Ellen Olenska (*Age* 158). Although at that time Newland had not seen Ellen recently, “he had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities; thither he brought the books he read, the ideas and feelings which nourished him, his judgments and his visions” (*Age* 159). When Newland must conjure up an explanation about why he must go to Washington rather than admitting his intended tryst with Ellen, the scene takes place in his library at home with May (*Age* 161). When Beaufort, Newland’s primary competition for Ellen’s attention, decides to remain in

New York even after his financial problems, Newland attempts to retreat to the library. May follows him, and they go “up to the library for coffee” (*Age* 177). When the library no longer serves as a private place for Newland’s reflections, he further retreats by choosing a book to read that he knows May will not enjoy; therefore, he is able to disengage more completely.

Even when the house is empty and Newland is alone on the night after he meets with Ellen to decide whether she will stay in America or return to Europe, he returns home and retreats to the library to contemplate his future (*Age* 188). As Newland attempts to tell May about his feelings for Ellen, they are in the library, the place of Newland’s imaginings (*Age* 193). During preparations for Ellen’s farewell dinner, Newland once again retreats from the activities by pretending not to hear his name being called and instead “[springs] up the stairs to his library” (*Age* 197). After Ellen’s farewell dinner, the men retreat to the library to be the arbiters of what type of women and men should be permitted in their social circle—an intrusion of Newland’s safe haven (*Age* 202). Once all the dinner guests have departed, Newland goes “up to the library and shut[s] himself in” (*Age* 204). This is when May arrives and destroys his imaginary visions by disclosing that she is pregnant with their first child. Long after his course in life is cemented by this disclosure, Newland continues to use his library for a place of refuge, even though his reflections are quite different decades later, after raising a family and grieving May’s death.

In the latter phase of his life, Newland sits in his library after returning from “a big official reception for the inauguration of the new galleries at the Metropolitan Museum,” the same “library which, for over thirty years, had been the scene of his

solitary musings and of all the family confabulations” (*Age* 206). Important personal business takes place in the library: May announces her pregnancy; Dallas, their son, takes his first steps; Mary, their daughter, announces her engagement; Newland kisses his daughter there prior to her wedding; and May and Newland discuss the futures of their children (*Age* 206). Newland does become successful in his lifetime, and the seminal seed that begins his successful trajectory happened in the library when the “Governor of New York [. . .] said ‘Hang the professional politician! You’re the kind of man the country wants, Archer’” (*Age* 207). He becomes a member of the State Assembly and studies enough to write articles aimed at reforming the country. Although Archer may have indulged in imaginings and grappled to understand the books he read in the early days, his persistence in academics is ultimately rewarded.

Similarly, Wharton spent many days in the library studying and wondering whether, as a female, she would ever be permitted to share her art with the public and whether her art would be worthy to share. Wharton points out that fortunately books were “an essential part of the old New York household. In [her] grandparents’ day every gentleman had what was called ‘a gentleman’s library’” (*Backward* 52). Although her father’s library was rather small, it contained many classical pieces that contributed largely to Wharton’s development. While her older brothers went to school, Wharton often studied literature and languages in the library under the tutelage of a governess. In fact, Wharton credits this approach and says her father’s library “had the leading share in my growth” (*Backward* 64). What was not accepted publicly could be accomplished in the privacy of the family library. Wharton rarely received encouragement in her pursuit of these academic endeavors. Instead, her mother was “perplexed by the

discovery that she had produced an omnivorous reader” (*Backward* 64). Yet Wharton persisted and pursued her innate passion for artistic interests, including horticulture, architecture, and letters.

Wharton was a very shy young lady whose tastes often did not conform to those of the people around her. While her autobiography offers scant details of many phases of her life, one biographer points out that Wharton “creates a retrospective picture of herself as an alienated, solitary figure, a writer-in-the-making” (Lee 17). Wharton abides by her artistic convictions when she creates Newland’s character, a man who “reads too many books on anthropology for his own good [and] takes part in the rituals of his tribe with a sense of alienation. The social structures he lives by seem unreal to him” (Lee 23). While Newland and Wharton both share a love of books and the arts, they are each perplexed by the stigma that New York society places on the very creators of the works themselves.

One example of the satisfaction Newland receives from intellectual conversation is developed in his relationship with Ned Winsett, a man of letters who is eking out a living as a journalist. Newland finds that their conversations are satisfying in a way that is not possible within the narrow confines of his society. He describes “their common fund of intellectual interests and curiosities made their talks exhilarating [yet] their exchange of views usually remained within the limits of a pensive dilettantism” (*Age* 78). The duality of Newland’s sensibilities cannot be mistaken here. Wharton reinforces this idea when, M. Rivière, a man with an “insatiable taste for letters,” works in Europe as a tutor and desires to find employment in America (*Age* 122). Newland enjoys his companionship and intellect so much that he describes their hour-long conversation as

putting “new air into his lungs” and tells May “we had some awfully good talk after dinner about books and things” (*Age* 123). Wharton scripts May’s response similar to one she would receive from Teddy. Wharton was “stifled by her husband’s insensitivity to her intellectual interests” (Wolff 52). Similarly, May responds that the tutor is common, awkward, and, therefore, socially unacceptable (*Age* 123). Even this slight variance from protocol is quashed immediately.

Clearly Wharton’s interest in books and writing was not socially tolerable either, both because she created art and also because a lady would certainly not be expected to engage in those intellectual pursuits. Wharton learned that her world “was not a world that encouraged literary leanings [. . . and] the intellectuals and artists who might be encountered amid the wholly masculine company at the Century Club were on the whole a boring lot” (Lewis 34). In short, Wharton was unable to find any peers in her community. Yet, “she was addicted to books and ideas and the world of the imagination” (Lewis 35). The hurtful and extraordinary extent to which society shunned such pursuits is demonstrated by Wharton’s broken engagement to Harry Stevens due to “alleged preponderance of intellectuality on the part of the intended bride” (Lewis 45). This devastating blow contributed to her feelings of isolation and loneliness. Fortunately, Wharton met the very astute Walter Berry during a summer vacation in Bar Harbor, befriended him, and regularly discussed literature and intellectual matters with him. He became one of her closest lifelong friends. Such opportunities for “genuine communion of intelligence and literary appreciation” were rare (Lewis 48). Wharton’s husband, Teddy Wharton, was not a man of letters or a man who shared the same

academic interests; so, over time, Wharton amassed a close circle of literary friends in both America and Europe to quench her craving for like-minded companionship.

In the final version of *The Age of Innocence*, Newland marries May and learns to live a life of quiet satisfaction rather than a life of intense passion with Ellen. This ending allows Newland to travel to Paris after May's death and have the opportunity to reunite with Ellen, a scene he had imagined so many times while he was "[s]itting alone at night in his library" (*Age* 177). Prior drafts have a very different plot, one where Newland leaves May, marries Ellen, and ultimately does not achieve happiness. I suggest the prior storyline too closely parallels Wharton's personal experience where, in the latter phase of her life, the passion she realizes in her mid-life affair results in only fleeting happiness. The current, revised version allows a slower, multi-generational progression toward the achievement of personal freedom. Newland "accepts the responsibilities that necessarily precede maturity and individual integrity. He has rejected notions of narcissistic self-fulfillment" (Wolff 320). At the end of the work, the reader learns that Newland and May's son, Dallas, will marry someone purely for love, someone whose lineage would not have been an acceptable in old New York. Newland's steadfast approach to transcending societal limitations becomes manifest in the next generation.

Wharton's personal story continues in the character of Ellen Olenska, the third person in the amorous triad. The divergence between Newland's character and Wharton's actuality happens when Newland decides to stay in America and marry May. At that point in the novel, Wharton transfers much of her personal material to Ellen. Like Ellen, Wharton returned to the Europe of her earlier memories to seek happiness

and to place physical and emotional distance between herself and her ties to old New York. Her hope was that she would be free to create and share her art as well as to interact with other artists in a safe and nurturing environment.

IV. COUNTESS ELLEN OLENSKA: MIDDLE AGE TO THE GOLDEN YEARS

Edith Wharton portrays the most fully evolved version of herself in the character of Countess Ellen Olenska. Both Wharton and Ellen were born into the rigidity of old New York, had spent part of their past in Europe, returned to life in New York society, and ultimately decided to reside in Europe. The accepted social mores varied greatly between the two continents. Because the narrow confines of Wharton's childhood were stifling to her artistic sensibilities, her memories of Europe became the impetus for her to relocate to Europe where she could begin a new, freer life. Wharton did free herself from the stifling old New York ways when she returned to Europe as an adult and "spread her roots and burst through the vessel that was meant to hold her" (Lee 88). This physical move began the transfiguration that ultimately allowed Wharton to surround herself with intellectual friends, art, music, and the freedom to develop her craft and become a Pulitzer Prize-winning author.

One of the most obvious similarities between Wharton and Olenska is their passion for the arts. Wharton's first exposure to Europe as a young girl who was visiting with her parents highlighted the continental attitude that art was not only accepted on the continent but, more importantly, was embraced and encouraged as part of a full, well-rounded life—a stark contrast to New York attitudes. Wharton establishes this dichotomy when Ellen first appears at the theater "revealing [. . .] a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing" and reminding Newland in public at their initial meeting that as a young child he had "kissed [her]

once behind a door” (*Age* 10, 12). Newland, as a representative of his class, regards such flirtations as “misplaced flippancy” (*Age* 12). However, the differences between European and New York attitudes transcend mere fashion and verbal statements.

While Wharton wintered in Europe and ultimately when she moved to Paris, she quickly established new friendships in addition to continuing those from America with fellow expatriates, many of whom were dear male friends, including Henry James, Walter Berry, and Howard Sturgis. In fact, these intellectual men of letters formed some of the most important relationships in her lifelong circle of friends. Because Wharton had a true appreciation for conversation and socialization, she was fortunate to be readily included in European society where dinner guests included the likes of Lady St. Helier, a well-known London hostess; Sir George Trevlyn, a historian; Harry Cust, a vibrant intellectual; Lady Essex, who was formerly Adèle Grand of New York; and William Archer, a translator of Ibsen (*Backward* 214-220). This partial list of frequent dinner company in London society indicates that the common intermingling of purely social and highly intellectual guests was routine.

The juxtaposition of this European dinner guest list with the invitees to the van der Luyden dinner in New York reveals that the guests of the van der Luydens are primarily members of New York society. The exception is that the van der Luydens are hosting the evening to honor their visiting cousin, the Duke of St. Austrey. The invitation to Countess Ellen Olenska is to signal her acceptance into the community. Archer watches Ellen arrive to the “momentous dinner” where her appearance is not “stylish” enough (*Age* 39). Once dinner was over, “the Duke went straight up to the Countess Olenska, and they sat down in a corner and plunged into animated talk” (*Age*

41). Newland was quite surprised that she knew the guest of honor who in fact used to visit Ellen each winter in Nice and was a frequent houseguest of hers (*Age* 41). The difference in attitudes and the arbitrary nature of standards in the largely encapsulated society is highlighted, and Wharton's retrospective portrayal of the world of her childhood is less than kind.

In Parisian society, Wharton particularly admired and enjoyed spending time with Jacques-Emile Blanche. Blanche, an exceptionally talented artistic painter, linguist, writer, and musician, had a penchant for new talent and new society members whom he regularly invited into his home. The walls of his living room were richly adorned with paintings by Renoir, Degas, Manet, and Boudin. Wharton was fortunate to be a guest during afternoons when there was a gathering of a "small company of music lovers, and it was enchanting to listen to Bach and Beethoven, Franck, Debussy or Chausson, with those great pictures looking down from the walls, and the glimpse of lawn and shady trees deepening the impression of the music by enclosing it in a country solitude" (*Backward* 284). Wharton reveled in the experience of being so completely and simultaneously immersed in the things she enjoyed most: intellectual company, art, music, and beautiful gardens.

Yet when Ellen attempts to enjoy these same cultural and artistic experiences in New York, society rebukes her obvious appreciation and instead voices opinions that are diametrically opposed to those Wharton enjoyed abroad. When Ellen attends an evening get together at Mrs. Lemuel Struthers's home where there is music, champagne, and smoking with the Duke, a European, and Mr. Beaufort, a fringe member of society, society reverberates with disapproval. While Janey, Newland's

sister, opines that Ellen should respect the feelings of the community in which she lives, Newland defends Ellen by saying that Mrs. Struthers “has good music, and amuses people on Sunday evenings, when the whole of New York is dying of inanition” (*Age* 55). Later Newland lets May go to Mrs. Struthers’s musical gatherings, because “[o]nce people had tasted of Mrs. Struthers’s easy Sunday hospitality they were not likely to sit at home [. . .]” (*Age* 157). These increasingly relaxed standards are early indicators of the inevitable obsolescence of New York society.

Although Wharton moved to Europe to gain the emotional and intellectual freedom essential for her happiness, Ellen attempts to achieve the same freedom by moving to an area outside the strict limits of society—an area populated with “[s]mall dressmakers, bird-stuffers and ‘people who wrote’ [. . . and] a writer and journalist” (*Age* 43). Ironically, the journalist, Winsett, is someone with whom Newland speaks and enjoys intellectual conversation but who is outside the limits of New York society both physically and socially. Newland’s interactions with the journalist are rather discreet, however, while Ellen’s choice to live in Winsett’s questionable neighborhood is much more difficult to overlook, once again a controversial decision. Wharton tells us through Ellen’s visitor, the Marchioness, that for Ellen “[a]rt and beauty, those things she does care for, she lives for . . . pictures, priceless furniture, music, brilliant conversation [. . .]” (*Age* 100). Just as Wharton enjoyed the enriching and stimulating company of her intellectual male friends, Ellen also has a history of associating with the artistic and creative set, with intellectual males generally, and particularly with M. Rivière, her husband’s secretary and a French tutor.

Wharton and Ellen both seek the happiness they are lacking in their marriages by cultivating friendships with those who similarly appreciate and produce the arts, many of which are not sanctioned within the confines of old New York. The diversity of arts that both women enjoy is very similar: painting, decorating, gardening, theater, music, and literature. While the majority of these relationships endures platonically for a lifetime and forms a cornerstone of solidarity, each of the women experiences one male confidante who plays a much more significant role in the trajectory of their lives.

Ellen leaves her husband, Count Olenski, with the assistance of his secretary, M. Rivière. Wharton makes it clear that Ellen's life with the Count is very privileged and full of roses, terraced gardens in Nice, jewels—including historic pearls and Sobieski emeralds—an affluence that she abandons in favor of the emotional and intellectual freedom she experiences with M. Rivière (*Age* 100). This intimacy is so essential to her very being that Ellen rejects multiple offers of monetary compensation to return to her husband and simply sit at the head of his table so as to present a united front. Count Olenski's reputation for serial affairs was so widespread that Lawrence Lefferts in New York had met Olenski in Nice and described him by saying, "when he wasn't with women he was collecting china. Paying any price for both, I understand" (*Age* 11). So if Ellen were to accept Olenski's settlement offer, it would not reinstate her as a wife per se, but merely include her among the many other women in his life. Lefferts also points out that Olenski is "a half-paralyzed white sneering fellow" which highlights another likely reason why his companionship may not have been tolerable for Ellen (*Age* 11). However, it is also clear that Ellen's relationship with M. Rivière transcends friendship, as Sillerton Jackson points out to Newland by saying, "You say the secretary merely

helped her to get away, my dear fellow? Well he was still helping her a year later, then, for somebody met ‘em living at Lausanne together” (*Age* 27). After Ellen moves to America and apparently ends her affair with M. Rivière, she is still on amicable terms with him. Just as Ellen sought solace and satisfaction in an extramarital affair, Wharton did as well.

Wharton immediately encountered difficulties in her marriage with Teddy, and she was very private about their relational problems for many years—until it became impossible to do so any longer. Prior to her wedding, Wharton pleaded with her mother to demystify the relations between husband and wife, and her mother berated her. Consequently, after a disastrous attempt to consummate the marriage, due both to Wharton’s naiveté and Teddy’s inexperience, Wharton sank into a lengthy depression. She discloses that “[f]or nearly twelve years I had tried to adjust myself to the life I had led since my marriage; but now I was overmastered by the longing to meet people who shared my interests” (*Backward* 122). The intimacy Wharton hoped for in her marriage had eluded her; however, she began to recognize other obstacles in her marriage as well: Teddy suffered from an inherited strain of mental illness. Apparently this history was longstanding and was punctuated with periods of “aggressivity and depression,” which resulted in intermittent stays at McLean Hospital and became progressively worse (Benstock 55). It is, however, unclear whether all of Teddy’s inappropriate actions were causally related to his medical condition, but he made it increasingly difficult to be in his company.

Instead of filing for divorce, Wharton sought satisfaction by exploring her emotional and sexual yearnings with Morton Fullerton, an American journalist who was

living and working abroad. Any mention of Fullerton is conspicuously absent from Wharton's autobiography, another nod to her societal breeding. Henry James introduced Fullerton to Wharton. Fullerton was "[a]ttractive, smooth and intelligent, [and] he made himself welcome in bisexual upper-class Edwardian London circles" (Lee 325). Fullerton had a reputation for having many lovers, something that Wharton may not have known initially. However, Wharton herself was surprisingly open minded for her time and in her work "championed the rights of authors to treat openly all the bourgeois subjects—sexuality, adultery, divorce, illegitimacy" (Benstock 390). During their very passionate affair, Wharton was able to finally realize what she felt other married women had known all along. When Wharton transfigured the relationship from that of lovers to that of friends, she was careful to maintain amicable long-term relations with Fullerton.

Wharton and Ellen both had affairs that offered temporary relief from bad marriages, but those relationships did not last. Ultimately, they both filed for divorce. Ellen's divorce is largely implied rather than demonstrated overtly in the text when she returns to Europe but not to her husband. Wharton filed her divorce in Paris when Teddy's illness became unmanageable. She states that "[h]is sweetness of temper and boyish enjoyment of life struggled long against the creeping darkness of neurasthenia, but all the neurologists . . . were of the opinion that there could be no real recovery" (*Backward* 326). In true New York fashion, Wharton filed for divorce as a last resort. By filing in Paris, the divorce records would be sealed, and both Teddy and Wharton would be protected from a potentially prying public. In the end, both women had no husbands, no children, and no lovers.

Initially this emptiness may be interpreted as a deficit due to the breach of societal dictates. It is important to note, however, that when both women return to New York for acceptance and to reclaim their place in the coterie, that very society itself was either not accepting of Ellen because of their steadfast and increasingly obsolete opinions or was largely disbanded and diluted by the time Wharton returned. One significant indicator of this is that Wharton, upon her return, was not shunned because she was a writer, but instead she was the first woman awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. She no longer had to look for scraps of paper on which to compose her work.

Perhaps the best attribute that Wharton and Ellen develop in spite of the limitations, strictures, confines, and suppressions of old New York is the capacity for compassion for the people near to them. This departure from the social stoicism in which they were raised exemplifies that their actions were not simply narcissistic actions of self-fulfillment at the expense of others. Instead, these women were allowed to reach out to others and extend genuine sympathy, support, and caring. Ellen, for example, helped her neighbor's son when he was injured while playing outside. Winsett explains, "she's been awfully kind to my little boy, who fell down her area chasing his kitten and gave himself a nasty cut. She rushed in bareheaded, carrying him in her arms, with his knee all beautifully bandaged, and was so sympathetic [. . .]" (*Age* 77). Similarly, when Beaufort has a financial crisis, New York society immediately shuns him and Regina, his wife, because of the breach of protocol; however, Ellen pays a visit to support Regina at a time when she has been alienated by everyone else. Initially these visits were made in the least conspicuous manner, by walking on foot. In time, Ellen becomes less concerned about public perception and borrows a carriage that she leaves

parked outside so that everyone will be aware of her visit to and support of Regina (*Age* 181). This demonstrates Ellen's courage and the passion she possesses to give to others, precisely the kind of acceptance she craves for herself. In short, she is a friend to others with the hope that she will in return cultivate friendships.

Wharton, in spite of her self-consciousness and shyness as a child, developed into a wonderfully generous and caring person as an adult. For example, after Edith's brother divorced Minnie Jones and treated her badly, Edith crossed family lines, sided with her sister-in-law, and looked after Minnie for the rest of her life. However, Minnie was only "the most important on Edith Wharton's list of continuing and even expanding private charities" (Lewis 508). She also joined a fund to help Abbé Mugnier, who was sightless, pay for a taxi to go out to dine daily and also to cover expenses for a surgery that was successful in partially restoring his sight (Lewis 509). These are merely examples of the type of personal charities in which she engaged.

Wharton's greatest act of caring was in Paris during World War I when she helped the displaced refugees who fled to Paris from the countryside. The magnitude of this effort was tremendous. After the first year, Edith announced: "9,330 refugees had been assisted during the year, 3,000 of them on a permanent basis; 235,000 meals had been served, and 48,000 garments handed out; 7,700 persons had received medical care; jobs had been found for 3,400" (Lewis 371). During the war, Wharton ventured to the front lines in order to better understand the nature of the war and the ensuing needs of civilians and soldiers alike. This effort was monumental and very distant in time and essence than anything she had experienced before.

Throughout their lives, both Wharton and Ellen remained true to themselves. Although their personal successes may not have comported with old New York, they followed their hearts and aspired to fulfill their personal desires rather than traditional mandates. Their desires are best described by Ellen when she says, “I want to do what you all do—I want to feel cared for and safe” (*Age 47*). This did not happen for Ellen or for Wharton in the sense of long-term, stable marriages where topical appearances are paramount. Rather, Wharton was a nurturer during the war and a pioneer who ventured out and blazed a trail for women writers and topics they could address. Ellen lived as a divorcée who refused to return to a marriage that was not happy and instead adhered to her own values. Both women garnered great satisfaction and happiness through the friends with whom they surrounded themselves. Perhaps this is the truest gauge of their success because their friends remained loyal and dedicated by choice rather than because of superficial social mandates.

V. CONCLUSION

Wharton was born into rapidly changing times when explorers were heading west to search for gold, railroads were passing through Indian territories, and investors were making and losing fortunes. However, Wharton was largely insulated from these world events as she was tucked away into old New York society. This society shunned the *nouveau riche* and anyone else outside their geographical and old-world parameters. When contrasted to the dangerous events outside the realm of the New York 400, this insular life may seem very desirable; yet in many ways it was not.

Wharton's mother, Lucretia Jones Wharton, descended from the privileged Jones family whom everyone else sought to emulate. While the financial security that was associated with this heritage was desirable, many other aspects of life were not only undesirable, they were intolerable. This idea first manifested itself in Wharton as a young girl when her desire to "make up" stories and to write were stifled generally and specifically by her very intolerant and insensitive mother. Her mother's pedigree came with staunch training to maintain topical and superficial appearances regardless of the consequences to her daughter's emotional growth and wellbeing. The negative effects of this cold, stoic parenting had a relatively minor impact on Wharton as a young girl, but the impact became more devastating as she became older. Wharton was very close to her father, and his death during Wharton's childhood left her with no buffer between her and her mother's harsh dictates.

One of the most devastating impacts Wharton received from her mother was the withholding of information Wharton requested about the intimate relations between husband and wife prior to her wedding. This need to maintain stoicism in even the most private setting between mother and daughter resulted in Wharton having a disastrous indoctrination to sexual relations, a long-term reaction that lasted for most of her adult life. The ensuing ten-year period of depression at the beginning of Wharton's marriage led to disillusionment and disappointment that she could never overcome with Teddy and may have directly contributed to her extramarital affair with Morton Fullerton.

During the early adult phase of Wharton's life, she experienced an emotional and psychological stasis during which time she evaluated her origins, her aspirations, and her options. Even though Wharton seemed quiet externally, she was engaged in the very important business of writing and anticipating how to best navigate her future. This time of quiet introspection was well spent, as evidenced by the course she ultimately pursued in her life, both professionally and privately.

Wharton's daily habit of writing in the mornings yielded not only great works, but offered a cathartic outlet for her emotional and personal contemplations. As a child, her "making up" was recreation as well as an escape from the harsh realities of her young life. Through dedication, perseverance, and hard work, she was able to transform her writing into a profession, a means to earn a living, and a way of coping with both old and ongoing challenges. She wrote about the things she knew best, based on her personal experience.

Because her New York breeding remained with her throughout her life, she often disguised the shortcoming of the rigid society in characters seemingly removed

from her personally. In order to accomplish this and to retain her fiercely guarded privacy, she often represented different aspects of her struggles in different characters to avoid any potential connection directly to her. Initially this strategy may have been largely successful during her lifetime. This need to protect her privacy as well as that of her family and friends is clearly evident in her sanitized autobiography. The work reads largely about whose dinner party was given when and contains no substantial information about significant people in her life, including her love affair with Morton Fullerton.

Over time, as each biography was written after her death as additional letters and documents became available, scholars were and are able to begin to piece together a more complete picture of Wharton's life; the more that is revealed, the more it is apparent that many of her characters in various works are largely autobiographical in nature. This is especially true in *The Age of Innocence*, where Wharton divides three distinct phases of her life between May Welland, Newland Archer, and Ellen Olenska. The phase of her life that is most painful is most distanced from her because it is depicted in the male character of Newland. May represents the agonizingly shy and helpless young girl struggling to survive in old New York, and Ellen represents the most fully self-actualized version of Wharton.

Because Wharton was fifty-seven years old when she penned *The Age of Innocence*, and because it was a retrospective analysis of her life after World War I, she portrays herself as the worldly and self-confident Ellen Olenska. This character is not pretentious; instead, she is a complex character commensurate with the woman who transcended unrealistic and harmful expectations of her class to become a

compassionate person and successful Pulitzer Prize winning writer. This is the aspect of her life of which Wharton seems most proud. It is this legacy she chose to leave rather than that of the privileged and sterile Jones family. She was a pioneer for women of her time, a prolific and successful author, and the first female to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction—a successful model for aspiring, creative, and intelligent women. While many of the issues Wharton faced and overcame may be historical, they have a quality of timelessness that makes interest in her work and her life endure, which is why scholars still study the author and her works. Her *oeuvre* documents her transfiguration from shy society girl to accomplished world traveler and author. However, only through extensive investigation can scholars begin to piece together the multifarious aspects of the life of the complex, intelligent, and determined author. While thousands of pages of serial biographies provide some insight into the intricate tapestry of Wharton's life, many aspects of the very private life that have intrigued students, scholars, and critics for decades still remain to be explored.

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