

A Study of Familial Perspectives in Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*

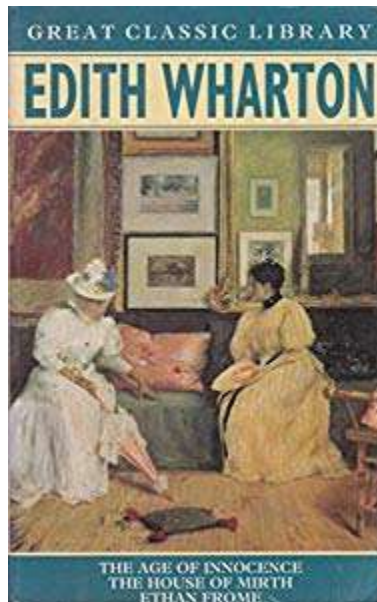
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Abstract

Edith Wharton is famous for novels indulge in family lives of both aristocracy and lower class. Age of Innocence is of same genre that consists of plots highlighting cohesive family, marital discord and divorce. The author captures the change in attitude of people for the past thirty years of static society. The rigid law which inexorable thaw and dissolve for the course of thirty years. Age of Innocence is the story of love among Newland Archer, May Welland and Countess Olenska. The novel depicts the two family models namely aristocratic and bourgeois family. This research article accentuates the importance of family and upbringing culture in the society.

Keywords: Edith Wharton, *Age of Innocence*, Form, Marital Discord, Aristocratic Family, Bourgeois, Authority

The plot of the novel revolves on a triangular love story of Newland, May and Olenska. The return of Olenska from her cynical husband to New York brings in twists on the tale as Newland gets engaged with May. The unwarranted attraction between Newland and Olenska was against the conservative Old New York society. Newland expedited the marriage with May to escape from any indiscretion. The novel shows many codes of conduct to be observed by young women and men at the time of marriage in Old New York. The marriage was solemnized after a fairly long period of engagements and betrothal which is an unhurried process which takes nearly six months between engagement and marriage

The Old New York aristocracy was an inflexible and provincial society which was an ancestral place of Newland and May Welland. In *The Age of Innocence* the threat came from Europe in the form of Countess Olenska who brought with her new set of values which is contradictory to old aristocracy setup. The changes like cut in the dress she wore, her free jovial mannerisms, choice of residence she chose and in all her activity. The highlights of transitions from aristocratic to bourgeois were observed from the action of the character Newland Archer.

As an individual Newland Archer is an aristocrat by upbringing, a bourgeois individual in spirit with keen romantic passion. He valued individual freedom more than anything else and at least in theory, he was willing to concede equal freedom to women: Mr. Jackson the authority on family insinuated that Countess Olenska was seen living with her husband's secretary who helped her to get away from Count Olenski. Newland's rejoinder is characteristic:

Newland reddened. "Living Together? Well, why not? Who had the right to make her life over if she hadn't? I'm sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age, if her husband prefers to live with harlots."

He stopped and turned away angrily to light his cigar. "Women ought to be free- as free as we are", he declared, making a discovery of which he was too irritated to measure the terrific consequences (39).

The novel is written in conventional third person narrative, the people and incidents of the Old New York are presented through the consciousness of Newland Archer and the view of events and characters is mediated by his consciousness. The meeting of Olenska and Newland depicts different disconcerting remarks about solemn and influential people like the Van der Luydens which shows her the critical of the inadequacy in his perspective.

The crux of the family situation was displayed through the children namely Dallas was critical of his observation of his parents.

“No, I forget. You never did ask for each other anything, did you? And you never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other and guessed at what was going on underneath” (359).

The hypocrisy of the Old New York is elaborated, and the clue can be found in their attitude to and experience of marriage. When Newland sowed his wild oats before marriage, society winked at it, and he himself dismissed it as permissible aberration of a young man.

Newman’s observation of May shows his view of society where she is unimaginative, and her mental eyes were bandaged with conversations. Newland was afraid of losing his heart to Countess Olenska who had a strong attraction for him. This fear inducted him to advance their wedding to an earlier date. The following reflection of Newland about May is not true and complete picture of her.

It would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman’s eyes and bid her look forth on the world. But how many generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault? He shivered a little, remembering some of the new ideas in his scientific books, and the much-cited instance of cave-fish which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them (81).

The study is the familiar question of individual versus society, Judith fryer argues: The two problems which Wharton investigated in this novel are related: one is the moral issue of the needs of the individual versus the claims of family, tradition and community and the other is the nature of that community (104). Newland saw himself as a victim of senseless convention at that moment. He could not foresee that the tyranny of society was not permanent, nor could he visualize that he would see some good in this convention after thirty years.

“Marriage is one long sacrifice” (209) is the declaration of Medora, aunt of Ellen. May thought that the marriage meant devotion and she sacrificed everything for it, and she remained unchanged and unaware of changes going around her. May did not realize that “the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuild itself” (Lawson, 24). Archer realizes at the last stages of life at the age of fifty seven, that he had missed the flower of life. But he did not regret it.

Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty; lapsing from that, it became a mere battle of ugly appetites. Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways (350).

In some respects, Newland Archer represents the attitude of a sensible mind which accepts changes. However, the life and marriage of his children, which would have been shocking thirty years

before, now shocked him no more. “There was good in the new order too” (352). He recognized the changes Old New York society had undergone. He reflected thus about the youth: “The difference is that these young people take it for granted that they’re going to get whatever they want, and that we are almost always took it for granted that we shouldn’t. Only, I wonder—the thing one’s so certain of in advance: can it ever make one’s heart beat as wildly?” (357).

Archer and Ellen are the two representative characters of the 1870’s who count, in registering two different attitudes to marriage of their times. Archer was romantic, and imaginative. Thirty years after, in Paris, “He had to deal at once with the packed regrets and stifled memories of an inarticulate lifetime” (360). Edith Wharton’s presentation of Welland’s family, or Archer’s family, or Beaufort’s family may not be very successful in the novel. Nevertheless, they survive, they last amidst changes and vicissitudes. Their family life might be dull or uninspiring, but they have to withstand the test of time.

To sum up, the analysis of *The Age of Innocence* shows that Edith Wharton, as the Grand Dame of the American novel has here not only recreated the social life and culture of old New York with its ubiquitous brown buildings and broughams but also pointed to the changes it has undergone in the course of about thirty years. It shows the difference between the past and present, especially the difference between the generation of father and son. Like the sociologist she acknowledges the changes with the conviction that change is inevitable. At the same time, unlike a sociologist or analyst of family, she makes value-judgment of these changes. These changes are largely attributed to the changes happened in industrial, economic, educational revolutions, feminist movements and scientific developments among many others.

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