

Confinement and Resistance: Gender Roles and Marriage in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

Vesta Serapha F.

PG And Research Department of English, St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract

Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, paints a vivid picture of 19th-century New York's rigid social codes, showing how women like May Welland and Ellen Olenska navigate expectations of innocence, marriage, and duty—one by following the rules, the other by daring to break them. This paper explores the intricate gender dynamics in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, focusing on the rigid societal expectations placed on men and women in 19th-century New York. Wharton illustrates how women are trapped within narrow roles defined by sexual innocence, marriage, and social duty. Wharton exposes the silent struggles and calculated power plays required for women to survive through the contrasting characters of May Welland and Ellen Olenska. May embodies the obedient wife and she subtly manipulates circumstances to preserve her marriage. Ellen, on the other hand, dares to defy these suffocating norms. Ellen's departure from New York reflects both personal liberation and the price society demands for nonconformity. Wharton critiques the deeply ingrained gender codes of her era by paralleling Ellen's experiences with aspects of her own life.

Keywords: gender, marriage, patriarchy, divorce, autonomy, freedom, independence.

Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* offers a piercing examination of the strict social codes that governed 19th-century New York, particularly the roles and expectations imposed on women. Beneath the polished surface of upper-class society lies a world where appearances are meticulously maintained, and individuals who dare to challenge tradition face subtle but severe consequences. At the heart of this world are two contrasting female figures: May Welland, the picture of compliance and societal perfection, and Ellen Olenska, a woman who dares to seek autonomy and self-fulfillment despite society's disapproval. Through these characters, Wharton explores the tension between personal freedom and social obligation, exposing the hidden sacrifices and quiet forms of resistance practiced by women constrained by rigid gender norms.

This study aims to analyze how Wharton uses the characters of May and Ellen to

critique the oppressive gender expectations of her time, with a particular focus on how women navigate power within the limitations placed upon them. By examining the complex ways both women assert control—whether through subtle manipulation or open defiance—this paper seeks to highlight Wharton’s commentary on the silent struggles for identity, agency, and survival within an unforgiving social structure.

Gender plays an important role in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* as each gender has been assigned its own respective freedoms and restrictions. Female subordination seems to be the most severe. Just to protect their dignity, women must be submissive to their societal ties or suffer the possibility of being ostracized. They are expected to maintain total sexual innocence at all times. They must seem to appear overly dutiful and loyal. It seems the only restriction men have is their jobs, which they toil at un- feverously. Both sides of the gender spectrum also had powers granted to them solely due to their gender. Although it may not appear that women have any powers, it’s merely because they are overshadowed by the cons of being a woman in this society. Women, most importantly, have the power to get pregnant. Although this may seem like a menial power or even a burden, pregnancy can be tactical.

Wharton describes the transformation of a single girl into a married woman. She showed how uneducated the girls were with love and marriage matters. Although the proper education can bring success, as could be seen in example of May, who was closed in her cage. She did not have any unimportant questions about marriage and she accepted her role at all circumstances.

Although powerful in social terms in the society, women were dependent on men to provide for them. If a woman came from a wealthy family, she might be fortunate enough to have a sum of money to contribute to the marriage, but women expected their husband to take care of all of their material needs. Women were expected to behave in certain ways, especially in the upper class. They were to master domestic skills, such as needlework, and they were never to challenge men or be unpleasant. A virtuous woman was one who was pretty, elegant, and compliant. In *The Age of Innocence*, May represents the New York society ideal, while Ellen hints at the strides being made for female independence outside the tightly knit New York community.

May’s marriage was happier and she was not childless. Wharton states that “a girl is only a sketch; a married woman is the finished picture” (New Frenchwoman 294), so Ellen comes to New York as a whole woman, however she was not accepted in society, although, it is only the married woman who counts as a social factor. She was

married but seeking divorce, by which she again lost on the social ladder. May and Newland's marriage was the same according to the general pattern that is the wife's efforts concentrated on home-making and child rearing. Newland outweighed this concept with the idea of being "the husband of one of the handsomest and most popular young married women in New York...one of the sweetest and most reasonable wives" (176). While looking at her appearance he had pleasant feeling of proprietorship, unfortunately, he could not forget about Ellen, he could not get her appearance out of his mind.

May wanted Newland to be happy, however, individual happiness was not the primary aim for the 19th century society. Newland did not realize that behind his back May had a plan. Cooperating together with all her family, she wanted to send Ellen away. The whole family wanted her to go back to her husband, where her rightful place was. On the contrary, Ellen and Newland were sort of manipulated, by May and her family. Edmund Wilson in *Justice to Edith Wharton* generalizes men in Wharton's novel "men are usually captured and dominated by women of conventional morals and middle class ideals" (352). Ellen was always positive about May, who was her nice cousin, who helped her to assimilate in New York. Ellen did not see the intrigues behind her back.

Ellen did not want to steal May's husband from her, she could have had him, however not as a husband as he was already married, but as a lover, which she refused. She had the instinct of self-preservation and she was also moral. To run from her husband did not mean that she was immoral. Ellen accepts the rules of the sexual and social game as determined by the society. The basic laws of this game are that a mistress has no rights and that a wife may use means as she has the rights necessary to preserve her marriage and the honour of her family. Ellen in that case would not like to be a mistress because a mistress does not have any right and she wanted to be free and have her rights. May in the same case has the right to fight for saving her marriage and she later uses all possible means. Ellen understands that the protection that society provides must not be relinquished. The code of behaviour prevents her from becoming a mistress and Newland from spiraling into professional and personal ruin.

May, according to Newland, did not have imagination and their life would be monotonous, of which Newland was afraid. He later lacked excitement, which he experienced with Ellen. She was always herself and she was a huge personality. May, on the other hand echoed what he told her at the time of their engagement, but later in the marriage she developed her own opinion. However, she was still doing what was

expected from the society, she did not like needlework, she was not good at it, but because other wives did it, she was knitting as well.

May wants to hide her willingness for Ellen to go far away, she would like to hide it in front of Newland, for him to think that she likes Ellen. “I’m afraid I haven’t been fair to her [Ellen] lately” (266). She plays the role of a wife who wants to keep her husband for herself and rather wants his mistress to go away. She does it with the help of her family without his knowledge, she uses all the tools she can and she has the right to do it, to save her marriage. Wharton made her to do it by intrigues rather than to persuade her husband or at least talk to him about it. It was a period when people apparently did not talk about such topics, and naturally May and Newland did not talk about their relationship at all.

May uses the most powerful lie to get back Ellen from New York. At one point in the story, Newland thinks that May hates Ellen. She would like not to hate her and she would like to help him to overcome his feelings towards Ellen. May found a perfect reason for Ellen to go away for the rest of their lives. While having a long talk with her she did not forget to mention to Ellen that she is expecting a baby with Newland. It was the last straw for Ellen and nothing could keep her from going back to Europe.

May made her triumph complete by organizing a farewell dinner for Ellen, to show how nice she is to her own cousin. May works unscrupulously to defend her position - that of married woman whose husband has no other duties but those of providing for, loving, her and their children. Newland fulfills his role. May uses a lie, because she was not sure about being pregnant while talking to Ellen about it. She uses the information as a weapon against Ellen and it becomes unethical, although she was fighting to save her marriage.

Wharton mentions May’s great satisfaction several times, apparently to show the amount of May’s feeling about her own action, “he [Newland] met May’s triumphant eyes” (286), “glitter of victory in his wife’s eyes” (287) and “her blue eyes wet with victory”

(290). May did not tell anyone as to how she feels about her victory, not even to her husband, but she let him to perceive it through senses, through her eyes as she didn’t want to expose her other side.

Traditionally, marriage is the destination that all women are supposed to reach and the only way to be happy. Ellen was not single; she was married but not living with her husband in one household. For Ellen, however, an unhappy marriage is nothing more

than a restriction. She values her own freedom and she will ask for a divorce when her marriage is not working in the right way, though divorce is not favored by social customs. She was Europeanized, experienced, and therefore corrupted. She has fallen in love, however does not have an affair with the other man; she just enjoys life and a kind of freedom which does not really allow her to find mother man. Finally, she seeks divorce, and with the label divorced woman she leaves for Paris.

Ellen had possibility to go back to her husband. He also promised her to give her back her money, which was an attractive offer, however she refused it. She did not want to go back and experience the same cruelty as she did before, only for the sake of money. Ellen's life might seem strange to the readers. She ran from her husband and she could not have her beloved man, because he was already engaged. Ellen must have been a great woman and friend because she did not grab her chance to be with Newland but rather told him to marry May, even though, she loved him. The reader does not get the glimpse of how society in Paris perceived a young lady who was divorced from her husband.

Aristocratic privilege enabled some English ladies to flaunt middle-class standards: women intellectuals in Paris were not absolutely constrained by bourgeois codes. In the United States, however, increasing number of well- educated women seemed to be trapped by domesticity (Cuncliffe 286-7).

The society by Cuncliffe was not so bewildered by codes in Paris and it might be one of the reasons why Wharton left America for Paris. Wharton preferred France to England, because she did not stay in England, where she had many friends. She also sent Ellen to Paris, Ellen was apparently accepted by society more easily than anywhere else.

Ellen moved to Washington, because she could not stand, that in New York people did not have their own opinion but they all relied on the opinion of someone who was superordinate to them. It was not Ellen's habit, she was free in her opinions and she was willing to meet variety of people with free ideas, which was impossible in New York, where everyone was narrow-minded. She felt different from all those people and that might be the main reason why she did not try harder to participate in the life of the upper class New York society. They seem to be not worthy for her, she needed to communicate and she prizes good conversation even more than the heirloom jewels and priceless antiques that she married into. Ellen had this opinion because she knows of no country in which

there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America. Ellen needed to be livelier and freer, not to be tied with so many rules. Her later decision to move to France might have similar basis of free mind as France being more free spirited. But in New York was the man whom she loved and could not have, and therefore she did not want to be close to him.

Ellen's desire to leave New York might also have come from Wharton's impression about New York, she apparently did not like it much: "intolerable ugliness of New York" (Little Girl 256). On the contrary Ammons says that Wharton did not hate her country or feel aggrieved; she simply needed an older, richer environment in which to live and work. Having spent large portion of her youth in Europe, she settled abroad. Ammons seems to be apologizing for Wharton of her leaving America, but it seems that Wharton did not have any liking towards New York and she was deeply disappointed with her native country.

Some of the rules and principles of the 19th century New York society seem comparatively very strange. The "divorce was considered sociably unacceptable. This does not mean...that families were living happily and in harmony. A high rate of desertion and separation of couples took the place of legal divorce" (Haveren 255), which was partially Ellen's case. As it is mentioned in *Hastings History*, woman could not escape from cruel marriage, and until 1891 woman running from husband could be captured by police and returned to husband. The church, law and also the society approved of the situation. Ellen was lucky that her family saved her and did not return her to her husband. Primarily, Ellen longed for divorce, but the circumstances were unfavourable against her getting divorced so, unfortunately she was persuaded to remain in marriage. However, after she did not find any luck in America, she persisted on the divorce and reached it at the end.

Ammons explains Wharton's clear point that in America would Ellen never be independent, as well as Wharton. It seems that neither Newland's and May's marriage was as happy as others might have awaited. Newland never fully devoted himself to May which she knew, but apparently never complained about. What Newland has lost is not Ellen, but May, whom he never took pains to know or to love. May who knew all along the extent and the fullness of her husband's sacrifice, they both tried to remain in their marriage. It might be proof that people cared enough about the content and quality of family life and marriage to be willing to dissolve an unsatisfactory marriage. The problem with May and Newland might not have been deep to the extent of divorce,

because May loved Newland and he did not dislike her. May lived a proper life without scandals, being a perfect wife respected by husband and society. Newland proved to be loyal and faithful to her even after her death.

Newland was free to go to find Ellen, and his son Dallas wanted to help him to be happy after all, after spending the whole life longing for something unreachable. Now, when he had it in front of him, he did not go for it. He decides not to see Ellen. It might have been because of his loyalty to May, but it seems that he was more afraid of the meeting, than being loyal. Although, he has lived according to Old New York society's codes, he was missing something all of his life, he led "life without passion, without expression, without satisfaction" (Doren 386). He apparently did not know how he could apologize to Ellen, and therefore he sees only one possible way, to leave all as it is and not to see her. It was too late that he realized what the members of New York's elite think of one another is more important than individual effort, honour, or happiness.

Finally, Wharton made Newland realize such a problem, through his own son; however, Newland could not do much about his situation at the moment. It was too late and he was unable to act, he could only be dreaming of action. Wharton announced that the sealed society of Old New York, which could not admit of the marriage of Newland and the Countess, must inevitably open to modernity and to the wider world, and must thereby pass out existence and therefore Wharton puts Newland's family await the chance "Newland family... feels keenly the changes in New York society, vigilantly tracing 'each new crack in its surface'" (Bentley 454).

In the novel, different behaviors and manners are expected from both men and women. Professions such as banking or law, or politics were seen as more distinguished and acceptable for men. Women are expected to act according to society's conventions as innocent wives, mothers, and daughters. In *The Age of Innocence* Edith Wharton puts opposite options for both men and women, one is to follow the orders of the mainstream society and the other is to revolt from the forbiddance. From this the reader can see that her attitude towards the old gender roles and her understanding of human life are ambivalent.

In *The Age of Innocence* Wharton contemplates on marriage types in her time in America. In some occasions, a man owns a female and a female needs a man to ensure her what she wants in life. There are several qualities that the female is supposed to have in order to guarantee herself a male, which also leave her with no other power or ability at all. Women of innocence like May are trapped in their limited roles. Newland Archer

perceives May as a light under ice she embodies “the steadying sense of an unescapable duty” (176). Except for May, Mrs. Welland is also an example of socially required woman (she trains her daughter to be one as well). She believes in the prescribed gender relationship, which tells people the right and wrong. Her relationship with her husband serves for May as a model in her marriage. While women like Ellen, although they are mostly alien to the old society, they are still fearless in fighting for what they want. In that patriarchic society women must follow the rules that are determined by men. For example, in the novel, Lawrence Lefferts is an example of hypocrisy. He himself has numerous illegal love affairs but he severely criticizes Ellen for divorcing her husband. However, the New York society treated him with tolerance only because he is a male.

The society in which Wharton was reared and which she wrote was the feudal remainder of the traditional New York aristocracy. Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* beautifully echoes the pain of being a woman in a patriarchal social setting.

Works Cited

- Ammons, Elizabeth. “Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse: Edith Wharton on Innocence and Art.” *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, edited by Fritz Fleischmann, Hall, 1982, pp. 1-20.
- Bentley, Nancy. *Realism, Relativism, and the Discipline of Manners*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.
- Cunliffe, Marcus. *The Literature of the United States*. Penguin Books, 1954.
- Haveren, Tamara K. “Continuity and Change in the American Family.” *Making America: The Society and Culture of the United States*, edited by Luther S. Luedtke, United States Information Agency, 1990, pp. 75-90.
- “Little Girl.” *The Age of Innocence*, edited by Candace Waid, W. W. Norton & Company, 2003, pp. 350-352.
- “The New Frenchwoman.” *The Age of Innocence*, edited by Candace Waid, W. W. Norton & Company, 2003, pp. 353-355.
- Van Doren, Carl. “An Elder America.” *The Age of Innocence*, by Edith Wharton, W. W. Norton & Company, 2003, pp. 305-308.
- Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. Peacock Books, 2022.
- Wilson, Edmund. “Justice to Edith Wharton.” *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1947, pp. 175-200.