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Masculinity within the Age of Innocence

Joyce Carol Oates once said that “Reading is the sole means by which we slip often helplessly, into another’s skin, another’s voice, another’s soul.” I believe that not just reading but literature, in general, is the gateway through which we understand more about ourselves, others, and reality itself. Throughout history, pieces of literature, the themes they present, and the characters created have provided insight into aspects of reality and society of the past or present that we can learn from and apply to our lives. One of these such pieces of literature is Edith Wharton’s 1920 novel, *Age of Innocence*. The novel focuses on the social elite of New York in the 1870s. Specifically, the young couple Newland Archer and May Welland who are due to get married, her cousin Countess Ellen Olenska, and the subsequent relationship between Newland and Ellen after her unexpected arrival in New York. Wharton uses the relationship between Newland and Ellen as well as Newland and May through the lens of rules and morals of high society in 1870s New York to highlight the restrictive nature of gender roles of women in this period and how they played into the subjugation of women within society. While this theme cannot be argued, I do however want to use this essay to highlight an understated theme of Ms. Wharton’s work, the impact of gender roles on men in the 1870s and how they place restrictive expectations while limiting the value of man’s individuality, through the novels’ main male character Newland Archer and his limited sense of individuality because of societal expectations of masculinity.

However, before analyzing the specific effects of gender roles, it is important to understand why they exist and the purpose of their placement within society and human behavior. We have developed gender roles because as humans we desire common knowledge as a reference point to all that we know and understand within all aspects of our lives and that includes ourselves and our behavioral traits. Cecelia Ridgeway in *FRAMED BEFORE WE KNOW IT: How Gender Shapes Social Relations* states that “We need a shared way of categorizing and defining “who” self and others are in the situation so that we can anticipate how each of us is likely to act and coordinate our actions accordingly. She also goes on to state how “The coordination problem inherent to organizing social relations drives populations of people who must regularly relate to one another to develop shared social-category systems based on culturally defined standards of difference.” (Ridgeway 148) I agree with her argument in we do need common knowledge, but I only see the value of common knowledge in devices such as language, laws, or science and health because they are components of critical systems within society that must be understood by everyone for society to function properly. Where I challenge her argument is that this idea can be applied to individuals and through its application help us understand ourselves better.

Yes, it can be said that categorizing and defining ourselves can be helpful in topics, for example, that may involve sociology because they focus on something that affects an individual and how that relates to a larger group and through that highlight or stress the importance of broader social or political issues that affect society. However, creating a generalized idea of an individual or group then sets limits on our character and defines people’s identities based on societal expectations. A common example of this is gender stereotypes. As stated by the United Nations, a gender stereotype is a “generalized view or preconception about attributes or

characteristics, or the roles that are or ought to be possessed by, or performed by, women and men.” Our individuality and distinct personalities define who we are as people because it allows us to be different and expand beyond conventionality. Gender roles and stereotypes limit this key aspect of humanity and hinder our ability to be our true selves. As Rebecca J. Cook and Simone Cusack express in their book *Gender Stereotyping: Transnational Legal Perspectives* when they write, To the extent that stereotypes ignore individuals’ needs, wishes, abilities, and circumstances, they significantly impact their ability to create and/or shape their individual identities according to their own values and wishes. They also limit the full and diverse expressions of human character. Put differently, stereotypes infringe unduly on the capacity of individuals to construct and make decisions about their own life plans.” (Cook and Cusack 3)

I now want to apply these arguments to Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence*. However, before analyzing the characters and the themes of the story, I first want to give background on the Victorian Era itself. The Victorian Era was an era of social, political, and economic change within America. One of the biggest changes during the Victorian Era was the industrialization and urbanization of the US. Americans had moved out of an agrarian-based lifestyle and into a more urban lifestyle. With this change came a shift in the idea of masculinity. As stated by Gary Crump in *A New Man: Masculine Confusion and Struggle in the Works of Edith Wharton*, “Men no longer could rely as much on grueling manual labor to prove their physical strength and masculinity since the industrial revolution had provided machinery to do tasks formerly performed by hand. Many farmers lost their farms and could no longer support their families in the traditional American way: “In 1800 over 80 percent of American men had been farmers; by 1880 only one-half the nation’s labor force was in agriculture” (Kimmel 82). “The occupational shift’s impact led more men to venture into the business world...” (Crump 4). Men at this time,

in order to preserve their masculinity within the changes of America, had to move away from physical strength and farming as the basis of masculinity and into mastering a skill beyond those spheres of life while maintaining other expectations such as having a wife, kids, property, employment, and social activity. This shift in masculinity as well as the overall shift by America from agricultural to industrial in the late 1800s would come to serve as the basis for when the Age of Innocence and its characters reside in.

The Age of Innocence was set in late 1800s New York. This is significant because not only was the novel set in New York, one of the most transformative and innovative cities in America, it was set within the high-class rich society bubble of New York. Yes, the country was slowly evolving into a more modern age but this small bubble which represented a small fraction of New York was one of the final holdouts from this inevitable evolution. The high society of New York was set under the ideas and practices of when the Victorian Age was at its highest. As Sean Kirby states how “Claire Preston notes, Wharton consistently impresses the importance of societal regulations upon her audience: “In the opening scene of *The Age of Innocence*, 4 we are introduced to this dialectical code through a range of details, all proposed as unyielding, unexplained, communally, and tacitly subscribed to as if they were natural laws” (6). (Kirby 4) This introduces Cecilia Ridgeway’s argument on the idea of common knowledge and how human nature “drives populations of people who must regularly relate to one another to develop shared social-category systems based on culturally defined standards of difference.” (Ridgeway 148) because here, the social system within rich late 1800s New York is treated as law that everyone must follow. The main male character Newland Archer is introduced to us as a lawyer who is to be engaged to the socially upright, May Welland. Here it is shown how Archer exemplifies this new adjustment of masculinity because he resides within a profession that

focuses not on his physical strength, allows him to engage with his within his social class, and he will take part in a marriage deemed acceptable by others within New York's high society with the expectation that they will start a family, and as it is shown he is content with abiding by these societal expectations. That is however until the arrival of May's cousin, the recently divorced and returned from Europe, Countess Ellen Olenska. I highlight the usage of recently divorced and returned from Europe because divorce at this time in the US was frowned upon and Europe had different cultural ideologies from high-society New York as shown through Ellen's difference in character from other members of the New York social sphere. As the novel progresses, Archer becomes enamored with Ellen because of her charming personality and how her views on life offer reality different from the social norms of New York and his marriage to May. Her introduction led Archer to realize the restrictive nature of the expectations unwillingly placed upon him as they conflict with his individual desires, in this case, his growing desire to be with Ellen. He has realized how he has become defined by society's definition of being a man primarily through his engagement with May and how Ellen, through her unconventionality, has offered him a chance to break beyond society's definition of masculinity and live by his own desires. This conflict over which woman he wants to be with highlights the bigger internal conflict within Archer on whether to reject or embrace his individuality. As stated by Sean Kirby in *THE MAKING OF THE EFFEMINATE MALE: NEW YORK SOCIETY'S INFLUENCE ON NEWLAND ARCHER*, "Archer must not only choose between two different women--he must also decide whether to embrace or reject a society and people that alternately please, irritate, challenge, and bore him" (Kirby 1). However, the hidden and cruel reality of society comes to fruition towards the end of the novel. Newland discovers that all of New York society including May knew about his feelings for Ellen, and so they convince Ellen to go back to

Europe by using May's pregnancy to convince her that it will be best for everyone if she goes. Making Ellen leave abruptly and the sudden announcement of May's pregnancy to preserve the values of New York Society forces Archer to give up Ellen and stay with May and his child. In this way, society stifled Archer's personal desires and his individuality while limiting his masculinity to only the roles it has defined. Sean Kirby highlights this best when he writes in his essay, "He loses the opportunity to act upon his wish because he submits to the manufactured, society-driven will of others, rather than acting on his own genuine wishes." (Kirby 7)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states that "Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage". It seems as if traditional masculinity is a concept and character trait by which all men must in one way or another abide by, and by not accepting this concept you are not masculine. Sure, biologically maleness can be defined but I don't think it can be defined through physical and internal character traits because it is our character that is so unique. It cannot be defined under one idea because that constricts our humanity. Edith Wharton uses Newland Archer and his conflict between his individuality and his masculinity to highlight this fact. His feelings and desires to be with Ellen came in direct conflict with societal expectations to be with May because he too was within this cage. Newland Archer can be seen as a tragic hero because he, though only for a moment, did break free from that cage and reclaim his individuality before losing it in the end. Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence* may be a tragic story about losing love and losing ourselves within this cage, but it also highlights the potential within us to see beyond this cage and break free from it.

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