

Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

Thomas LaBorie Burns

The world of *The Age of Innocence* is New York upper-class leisured society. There is a "younger set" that, surprisingly enough to us moderns, yields to its older relatives in matters of how to think and behave. The families that make up the characters in the novel are, then, remarkable conservative, because of the time they lived, 'the early seventies', i.e. the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the 1870's, and also because of the social environment in which they moved and found the meanings of their lives. One thing the reader notices right away is that New York must have been a very different place a hundred years ago. The "vehicles" referred to throughout the novel are carriages, of varying types in accordance with the status of the occupants, and telephones are talked about as in the process of being invented. Another noteworthy thing is that the characters, like those in Henry James's novels, never seem to be working. They are "leisured" in the true economic sense, either having inherited money or having made it through being part of an important family with the resulting good connections. The main male character, Newton Archer, for example, is a lawyer in a conservative law firm, but he hardly kills himself working and even comes to feel that he is in the office more because it is proper that a man have a profession than because he is needed there. Business, it is to be noted, is nowhere in evidence, and is, indeed, considered a bit vulgar by these well-bred families. It is unthinkable, for example, that Countess Olenska should go to Mrs. Struthers' house on Sunday evenings only because the latter is a rich widow of a man who made his fortune in shoe polish.

Money, although it lies at the root of these characters' lives, is rarely referred to, for their greatest horror is of being vulgar, of doing something which is "bad form". The

rules, traditions, conventions, what is "done", and most of all, what is not even referred to or spoken of (such as Ellen's disreputable past) are all things which are sacred, and yet they are things that are difficult to observe and follow without error. The social pyramid is made up of what Mrs. Wharton keeps calling "old" New York, and what she has called in other stories and novels "the invaders", or the new money, earned in business, which poured into the city in the decades following the Civil War (which ended in 1865, or a few years before the time of the novel). This new money was necessary, of course, and was eventually accepted, as evidenced by the intermarriage of the old aristocratic families with the new ones like the Beauforts. But "old New York" continued to feel itself superior in all social questions and the tension, often comic, between the old and the new New York families is a major focal point of the novel.

Newland Archer is a dilettante, a rather effete young man to whom "few things seemed...more awful than an offence against 'Taste', that far-off divinity of whom 'Form' was the mere visible representative and viceregent". Newland, at least in the beginning, strikes us as somewhat of a prig and ever so slightly ridiculous. The satire attendant upon what is considered in his circle "proper" is constant and heavy. As the novel progresses, however, he becomes more sympathetic as he begins to question his own values, up to then always taken for granted, and those of his family and friends. His awakening coincides with his falling in love with Ellen, the Countess Olenska, but it is gradually developed through what he hears people say about her, and what he himself can observe, her freer spontaneous behavior. He says, almost surprising himself, that "women ought to be as free as we are", during his initial and gallant defense of the Countess, undertaken for the sake of the name of his fiancé's family, the Countess being a close relative. He is not here being the liberated male nor does he ever achieve such a status; he is merely defending the woman against the inevitable slander of

stodgy New York society because he feels that the scandal reflects adversely on May, the Countess's cousin and his own young, "abysmally pure" (his words) wife-to-be. Women can only be free as long as they conform to the expectations of men. "'Nice' women, however wronged, would never claim the kind of freedom he meant". This is a reference to the two kinds of women in the society — those, "who are loved and respected" and those "who are enjoyed and pitied". And we might add, ignored, like the pathetic married woman, Mrs. Rushworth, with whom Newland has had an affair. For men, such affairs are "adventures", but for women they are something to be ashamed of. "It was...foolish of the man, but somehow criminal of the woman".

This double standard of conduct is satirized, but it is also the central dramatic dilemma of the Countess, and in an oblique way, of May. Newland's words, quoted above, about "nice" women is an explicit repudiation of the immoral foreign (in Ellen's case foreign-cultured) women, the type Henry James portrayed in *The Ambassadors* in the person of Madame Vionnet, a threat to the virtue and safe domestic futures of young American males. Mrs. Archer, Newland's mother, thinks smugly about how all men must have their "little adventure" before their families try to get them married off to a "nice girl", to which the old Mrs. Mingott would agree, and at the earliest possible age so that the wife can "look after" the man. Women are seen, then, as preying on masculine innocence, and men haven't a real chance with such conniving creatures. With regard to May, Newland has an insight into a social system whereby nice girls are also trapped, but in a different way. If the women who are to be enjoyed have to live with "talk", the nice girls are doomed to an innocence which allows them no freedom. Thinking of May, Newland wonders:

What could he and she really know of each other, since it was his duty, as a "decent" fellow, to conceal his past from her, and hers, as a marriageable girl, to have no past to conceal?

Trained by a "conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses" - i.e. tradition handed down through the female line where "all this frankness and innocence were only an artificial product", nice girls hadn't a chance.

Newland is thinking these thoughts because he has just become engaged to a "nice" girl and is afraid, nay, knows, that his marriage will turn out like all the other marriages of that type he is familiar with. The romance is so carefully tended in the young lady that she prefers to "think about" going off to Europe before the conventional time rather than actually do it. That is, the dream is more important than the reality, and the "conspiracy" of society, embodied in other women who have presumably also been disillusioned but dare not face the fact, ensures that convention will triumph over love, as indeed it must. As Newland pleads with May more and more, he cannot comprehend her reluctance to give into her feelings rather than what is correct until his relationship with a woman who is not considered nice has begun to develop. The simplicity of his old views are challenged by his perception of the Countess's situation. She is so delightfully unfettered by the sort of thing May yields to, and therefore is so penetrating in her remarks. She wants a divorce because, we find out later, she wants to be "free" for Newland. He doesn't know this but he is in the beginning against the divorce because he still thinks like old New York. When he sees the family and their lawyer raise their objections, however, he immediately feels the injustice of their views. Following orders, he talks her out of it, only to learn the truth to his sorrow.

Like Chad Newsome in *The Ambassadors*, Archer can see the charms of someone who is not nice in the conventional way, a woman who has sophistication and experience precisely because she was not part of the conspiracy to become dishonestly innocent in order to attract a husband. Both Mme. Vionnet and Mme. Olenska have had husbands who have been unsatisfactory and both feel that that doesn't disqualify them from society; they are the type of charming independent woman, who is beautiful in a more mature style, that would attract a man disillusioned with the vacancy of a young virgin. Like Chad,

Archer resists the secure but bleakly banal future of marriage with one of these, and like Chad he becomes resigned to his fate by repressing his chance for freedom that his feeling for the Countess represents and submitting to the code of society by which a young man must marry the girl he is engaged to. It is a nice touch of irony that the device by which the engagement is prolonged is the preparation of a proper bridal trousseau, "twelve dozen of everything" all hand-worked, in itself a female social rite. Newland is doubly frustrated, first by not being able to get married right away and then by not being able to get out of it, both times by the code of what is "done". Even after he is married, he is surprised that "life should be going on in the old way when his own reactions to it had so completely changed". Underneath, he has the feeling that the "right" thing to do is the end of a meaningful life. "Not she (May) has changed; she is everything he could have hoped for. But what if 'niceness' carried to that supreme degree were only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness"? That is the question as far as marriage to a nice girl is concerned. As for himself, Newland has become, in Edmund Wilson's words, one of those tragic heroes of Wharton, "victims of the group pressure of convention... hungry for emotional or intellectual experience, who find themselves locked in to a small closed system and either destroy themselves by beating their heads against the prison or suffer a living death in resigning themselves to it".

What kind of system was it that commended the allegiance of the important families, so they formed a sort of "tribe" (as Wharton keeps insisting in the novel) ready to close ranks against anyone who might defy the norm?

They all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs.

Wharton's allegiance is clearly, in this novel, with individual freedom against the stifling repression of the tribe. Countess Olenska and, to Newland's dismay, her family, are slighted when

the invitations for the dinner given for her are turned down by the "smart younger set" (new money) represented by the hypocritical Lawrence Lefferts, the adulterous setter of style. Here the moral vacancy of cultural Form is exposed, especially in the person of Lefferts, a seducer of other men's wives and therefore in no moral position to snub the Countess for her past. Wharton repudiates the famous double standard by which men need not abide by rules which women must be so careful to observe. Archer ponders this and is disturbed by it but his worry at this point is double-edged. Mrs. Archer, his mother, appeals to Mr. and Mrs. Van der Luyden, king and queen of the old families and final appeal as to what is correct in New York society, and they pronounce on Lefferts' interference by saying that "society has not come to that" — i.e. people who are merely rich dare not snub someone as important as the Mingotts (who sent the invitations). Old New York in the person of Van der Luydens defends the Countess and allays Newland's anxiety by deciding in favor of the old family values. Form, by a nice twist, has been overturned, but only in the name of a higher Form!

Wharton throughout the novel is critical of old New York and its values. Newland's "living death" is indeed a repudiation of all it stands for. The representation of the tribal values of the family before the happiness of the individual, in the way the family crushes Ellen and excludes Newland from the decision to send her back to her husband, is extremely negative. And yet the author is herself ambiguous about old New York. She not only attacks the tradition but defends it, as is shown by Newland's not marrying Ellen after his wife dies. The widower, who sincerely mourns May, thinks:

It did not so much matter if marriage was a 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 honored his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways.

Here a reader might validly object that this is just one more example of how completely Newland accepted his repression, but it also bespeaks a sort of troubled peace with the "old ways". Perhaps Wharton herself hadn't resolved the basic conflict between individual freedom and the necessity for social conventions — necessary to prevent the "battle of ugly appetites" and other forms of social chaos. When Newland tells Ellen that he dreams of a place where they can be together, Ellen realistically wants to know where such a place could be. She is the biggest loser because of the rules and yet she defends them. Not breaking the trust which others (the family) have in them is more important than the consummation of their love. She says, "I can't love you unless I give you up". Still Archer wants to have it both ways, and again she understands the world better. She reminds him of the "shabby watering holes" in Europe, the out-of-the-way resort areas where adulterous couples, repudiated by society, end up, and shows him that this is the final outcome of romantic hopes and dreams. Like James, Wharton saw that one of the principal interests in fiction lay between the irreconcilable claims of society and the heart.

In the novel, then, there is tension between the longing for a society of finer sensibilities and that very society's repression of individual desire. The "totem terrors" of Archer's ancestors are said to have "ruled the destinies of his ancestors" much as the Forms of old New York rule him and his fellow characters. The group is repeatedly called a "tribe" because of the closeness of their beliefs and the rigidity of traditional forms to which everyone in the group must submit without question. Here is the pathos of Archer. He is a would-be rebel, sensitive enough to perceive the repression and be disgusted by it and yet not strong enough to decisively act against it. He is crushed by the tribe, who take life "without effusion of blood: the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage..."

On the other rule, Mrs. Wharton's portrait justifies her title, which is only partly ironic. The Age of Innocence is of

course not all that innocent. But the book is a portrait of an age which the author lived through and, despite her bitter memories, thought was worth saving. Vernon I. Parrington says:

... though she laughs at the deification of "form" by the Van der Luydens of Skuytercliff and the tyranny of their rigid social taboos, she loves them too well to suffer them to be forgotten by a careless generation.

The "careless generation" has begun immediately with the Newland's son, Dallas, who has none of the qualms or need for "mysteries" that his father had. Things are simpler for him; he can go right in and greet Madame Olenska. But even he gives to this father's generation credit for "knowing more about each other's private thoughts than we ever had time to find out about our own". It is hard not to hear the voice of the author in these words, for

She loved old New York with that mixture of grieving affection and protective impatience Faulkner would later feel toward Mississippi and Saul Bellow toward the Jewish neighborhoods of Chicago. (Irving Howe)

Newland Archer, like his creator, "cherished his old New York even when he smiled at it". It seems there was, without irony, good in the old ways after all. In her autobiography, Wharton has written:

It used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever again be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savored by a youthful palate.

Again we think of Dallas and the impatience of the new generation. Although she was the most ruthless critic of old New

York, Wharton herself was too much a part of it not to think it was worth "saving" in fiction. This saving gives the book the "flavor of an historical novel". (Auchincloss)

In considering what evokes the period so well, the first thing that is evident is the close and exact description of clothes, furniture, and homes that we should not be surprised to find coming from one who not only moved in the higher social circles, European and American, but published books titled *The Decoration of Houses* and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*. To the modern reader, the endless descriptions of rooms almost get in the way of the business of the story, but their precision and detail provide the setting for what is, after all, a story of wealth and the infinite small matters that make up the difference between the correct and the adventurous. The objects in Madame Olenska's poor but interesting house are one way of characterizing her, her aptitude and flair for arrangements and the unexpected individuality of her taste, and work upon Newland's imagination so that he thinks with some despair of the unimaginative rooms of his future mansion with the conventional May.

The description of people are also discriminating and show the firm artistic control of the author at all points in the story. The old tyrant Mrs. Mingott has a body which is "an immense accretion of flesh which descended on her in middle life like a flood of lava on a doomed city". On her face, "a flight of smooth double chins led down to the dizzy depths of a still-snowy bosom veiled in snowy muslins". The descriptions are pointed as well as comic, like the one of May, who remains "virginal even after marriage, a creation of factitious purity", Diana-like, complete with bow and arrow and dressed in white. Mrs. Wharton's style is clear and straightforward, unlike that of Henry James, of whom she has been said to have been a disciple. Her prose, whether ironic or descriptive, is a fine instrument for both comedy and the near-tragic destinies of her characters in this masterpiece about a "world of faint implications and pale delicacies".