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Gender, class, and freedom in Edith Wharton's "The Age of Innocence" and "The House of Mirth"

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Abstract

Edith Wharton was a social critic of the America of the late 19th century and early 20th century. She was a child of her time, certainly influenced by the mindset and attitudes of the beau monde in which she was born, but she was also insubordinate and audacious, challenging affirmed conceptions of the world and stereotypes of women, especially women writers. The House of Mirth (1905) and The Age of Innocence (1920) are her two most famous novels, presenting New York's society principles and rituals as they affected men and women differently. Wharton allows the reader to follow the female characters' journey as they navigate a patriarchal society in which they try to affirm themselves as independent and artistic beings, but she exposes how they never fully succeed as they are not free. Along with gender, the author concentrates on historical progress and the cultural changes it brought along, showing how ephemeral society's conventions really are.

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Introduction

This B.A. thesis has the purpose to present the American society of the turn into the 20th century as it is described by the American author Edith Wharton in two of her most famous novels, *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*. Both books focus on New York's upper class and the life of its members, and have a particular regard to the female gender and the constrictions it faces in everyday life by the societal pressure to conform to the tenets and rituals of the class.

The first chapter offers an overview of the historical moment, discussing the position to which the woman was assigned by the patriarchal society both in the Victorian era, where biological determinism outlined her as the weak sex and the doctrine of the separate spheres forced her at home to take care of the family, and in the early 1900s, when the technological progress and the transformations to the city's structure altered the nature of the leisure class and consequently the woman's role in it. The comparison between the two ideals of the True Woman and the New Woman reveals how the historical evolution of almost a century was not really accompanied by an advancement in gender equality and women's right to personal autonomy.

In the same chapter, there is also a focus on the figure of the woman writer, trying to emerge in a literary world dominated by men, where even here her supposed weaker sex disqualifies her from being esteemed as a real artist. The main themes she tackled came from her own experience, focusing on the limitations and the difficulties she encountered in her quest for a more fulfilling and independent life.

In light of these observations, I present the life of Edith Wharton as a woman and writer, taking into consideration how her upbringing shaped her personality and influenced her writing. Belonging to the haute bourgeoisie of Old New York and therefore knowing all its inner workings, she chose to represent them faithfully in her works of literature, mostly novels of manners which concentrate on women's deprivations in the patriarchal society and expose its hypocrisy and bigotry. The satirical style she uses to denounce men's exploitation of women is almost at odds with her human empathy towards them, highlighting the inconsistencies in her identity that cause her to openly criticize the American society of her time, but to covertly defend it at the same time.

The second chapter is dedicated to *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton's most famous novel. After a summary of its plot, I analyze the character of Newland Archer, the book's protagonist, and of his relation to the female characters of May Welland and Ellen Olenska. Newland's membership to high society has repercussions on his identity that prevent his true feelings and intentions from being realized; as a result, he immerses himself in an imaginary relationship with the real world surrounding him, responsible for his pigeonholing of his future wife, who he sees as childish and gullible, and of his real love interest, who he perceives as a femme fatale. However, an investigation of both women's true nature is presented, with close attention to May's actual astuteness and to Ellen's awareness of the world and of social sanctions. I also address the topics of the Opera and Newland's readings as metaphors for his entrapment in a fantasy world.

Moreover, the chapter deals with the comparison between the continents of America and Europe and how the latter's superiority, in which Wharton believed, is represented in the novel. After an explanation of the author's ideas about architecture and its connection to the psychological traits of a person, examples of characters who embody European or American values are provided, testifying also to Wharton's positive assessment of Ellen. In this regard, I investigate whether she can be reputed possessing a true artistic bent, in opposition to the false ingenuity of the rest of New Yorkers.

The final part of the chapter concentrates upon the social determinism Wharton maintained that existed in every human being's life and that through rituals and conventions inextricably binds Newland to his culture. In addition, I look into the two narrative voices of the novel and discuss how the anthropological thought they express endows them with a little more freedom from the codes and dreariness of their society. Lastly, I elucidate the ways the main characters of Newland, May and Ellen are fragmentations of the author's personality, and I offer a sketch of the new social panorama of the end of the book.

The third and last chapter is devoted to *The House of Mirth*, Wharton's most successful novel. After a brief review of the changes in the leisure class brought about by the turn of the century, an analysis of the culture of conspicuous consumption as it is embodied in the character of Lily Bart is provided. The examination of the institution of marriage and of the social transactions required to take part into the high society serves as a demonstration of upper-class women's impossibility to fulfill any other role except

the one of public displayers of their husband's wealth. Furthermore, I describe the scene of the tableaux vivants and how it contributes to Lily's perception as a promiscuous woman. The episode is also an occasion to illustrate the contraposition between Old New York and the nouveau riches, explaining the latter's inability to fit into the values of the aristocracy through the relation with their homes.

The chapter continues with a section dedicated to the male stereotyping of women in the two categories of the endangered and dangerous woman, and to how the geographical spaces of the novel epitomize Lily's loss of reputation and descent into poverty, delineating women's conflict between the need to exhibit themselves publicly and to retain some kind of privacy. As a matter of fact, the importance of managing privacy and publicity is the cause for women's split identity and the resultant difficulty to develop an independent and mature self and to institute real relationships with other people. Therefore, I show the hypocrisy and corruption of the beau monde and the exceptions portrayed in some of the novel's characters, Lily included, who still retain some moral principles. To conclude, I deal with the theme of fate and its opposition to social determinism.

Finally, there is a digression on the character of Lawrence Selden, of whom I explore the insight into Lily's consciousness that is deployed by Wharton as a means to counterpose society's journalism and to criticize New York's social elite. Selden has been created reversing the gender stereotypes that confine men to the position of household's providers, and his defiant inclinations and principles that isolate him from the rest of society and that he cannot fully stick to, prove that the male sex is a victim of the social realm as well as the female one.

CHAPTER 1

America at the turn of the century and Edith Wharton

1.1 From the Victorian to the New Woman

The passage from the 19th to the 20th century in America is one of the most remarkable in terms of cultural change. While the former was based on the notion of men and women belonging to separate spheres and saw very little female agency in the public realm, the latter broke with the past exactly in the women's need to affirm themselves as public agents, discarding many of the conventions of the Victorian era.

The established conception about women in those years was of an innate inferiority and weakness, both physical and mental, a conception mainly influenced by biological determinism. To support this ideology the cult of the True womanhood was created, according to which women were and had to be religious, pure, and submissive. Because their main characteristic as human beings was to give birth and subsequently to raise children properly, they were expected to be models of virtue, therefore to abstain from sex before marriage, and to confine themselves to the domestic space. Women who didn't behave accordingly were deemed unnatural and unfeminine, and the consequences of their sexual sins were inexorable: they were looked upon as members of a lower order, as prostitutes.

These ideals were spread throughout the nation by literature and the press, but only a small portion of the female population could embody them, that is white privileged women of the upper class, and even they were sometimes forced to leave the safety of the domestic space to support themselves when their fortunes changed. This male construction of the female gender as delicate and fragile, as well as men's perception of themselves as rational, self-reliant, and strong, allowed them to justify their superiority and gave them privileged access to the public sphere. Women, on the other hand, were relegated to the private sphere to which they were seen as naturally belonging because their feminine qualities were more suited for domestic labor and because they could fulfil the role of wives and mothers effectively. The doctrine of the separate spheres was also effective because it stressed how separation did not mean inequality nor imply inferiority

on the part of the female gender; the virtue of domesticity was a belief so deeply internalized by women that for a long time it was accepted as natural and remained uncontested.

Notwithstanding this patriarchal social division, domesticity functioned together with the public realm. Because the ideas of tradition and stability were associated with the home, in opposition to the ever-increasing modernization and industrialization of the workplace, men would come back to the sanctity of the home to be restored and reinforced in their values, thus fleeing the corrupting influences of the market. The moral purification inspired by women was seen as the key to the regeneration of the country (Welter, 1966).

To keep women in their place and perpetuate men's ownership over them, the institution of marriage was a powerful means since it implied that every property, body included, was to be ceded to the husband irrevocably. The moral imperative of purity had to be preserved until the wedding night, a moment from which women ceased to have a legal or emotional existence of their own and relied unconditionally on their husbands. Marriage was viewed as an unbreakable contract through which only men gained while women lost their already limited freedom. However, changes started happening by the middle of the century, initially allowing upper-class men to divorce, and later even women, but solely if they could prove their husband's adultery. Even so, they could not get back their own possessions, which was entirely allowed only in 1882 (Grossi, 2014: 20-21).

Clearly this advancement in women's rights is representative of a growing female discontent with the patriarchal society which emerged at the end of the 19th century. Women grew more and more tired of their subordination and began demanding equal opportunities and wider access to the public sphere. In this light, the cultural and political phenomenon of the New Woman emerged. The term was used to identify women who, "rejecting conventional female roles and asserting their right to a career, to a public voice, to visible power, laid claim to the rights and privileges customarily accorded bourgeois men" (Ammons, 1992: 7). In contrast to the stereotypical image of Victorian femininity, the New Woman was usually seen as young, active, and independent. In the conservative press, though, she was visually represented wearing more masculine and revealing clothes, smoking, bicycling and, more importantly, working while leaving the husband at home to manage chores and children. It was especially the proliferation of these images

of domestic men and bossy women that threatened male authority and traditional values since they directly challenged and reversed the gender roles existing up until that moment.

Nonetheless, the transformations happening with modernization at the end of the century brought along the need to display wealth differently from the Victorian era. According to economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen and his theory on consumerism, leisure-class women were the principal symbol of social status. Being considered a property and being cared for by working men, they were seen as objects whose only purpose was to display their household's wealth by showing themselves in public spaces wearing what had been bought with their husbands' money. Therefore, their banishing to the privacy of the home now proved to be inadequate to exhibit male success. The result was the progressive dismissal of old societal norms and the blurring of society's boundaries. Women were allowed greater access to the public sphere where they could enjoy goods and services previously accorded exclusively to men, and they were provided with new job opportunities, even though they earned a low salary and the positions were always associated with women's domestic skills and 'natural' propensity to care for others. Still, the fact that female work was now tolerated when just the idea of it was once unacceptable demonstrates how women were advancing in the accomplishment of their independence.

However, women's newly gained freedom was a paradox. Stranded between the new century, with its modernity and progress towards emancipation, and the traditional Victorian moral values, they faced contradictions and ambiguities as their societal role was endlessly questioned. Their presence in the public realm was as emancipatory as it was restraining: it was necessary for the display of leisure, but it contrasted with the traditional standard of femininity and contested male authority; besides, walking on the street could prove fatal if etiquette was not followed. Exposed to the gaze of others, specifically newspapers, women were constantly surveyed, yet they had to be neither too private in order to fulfil their exhibitionist role, nor too conspicuous to avoid defying rules of behavior and attracting unsolicited attention (Montgomery, 1998).

Moreover, the civilizing influence of the woman within the household having ceased, there was no longer a counter effect to the outside forces of society. Consequently, men tried to push women back to their domestic role in order to provide once again moral support to the nation.

On consideration of all the above-stated things, it is safe to say that for most women at the turn of the century the modern goals of equality and personal autonomy were often elusive. Despite having stood up for more rights and having demystified conceptions and principles regarding female gender and sexuality, women did not defeat patriarchy as a system and endured exploitation for most of the 20th century as well.

1.2 The increasing power of women writers

The subordination of women in the Victorian era and their confinement to housework managing was also reflected in the literary world. In the interpretation of the female gender as weak and delicate, higher intellectual activity was deemed dangerous because it drew energies from the body, precisely from the reproductive organs, and could cause irrationality and insanity. Moreover, writing was reckoned as a subversive act because it meant trespassing the boundaries of womanhood since the pen was considered a symbol of male authority and literature was a male domain. Anyway, it was a career available to women, particularly those of the middle-class, because they could stay at home and preserve their identity with pseudonyms to avoid fame. Regardless of the theoretical interdiction of the literary scene to women, most 19th century books were written by women, who were also the most successful in terms of sales of novels and short stories, but their works were discarded as banal and trifling.

While women writers of the 19th century did not hold back their desire to pursue the writing career and make money out of it, it was only at the turn of the century, with feminist movements claiming autonomy in the social sphere, that they asked for more representation in literature and claimed their entitlement to be esteemed as artists in their own right.

Art had always been the domain of privileged white men and the concept of artist had always been defined as masculine because men claimed to possess the intellectual rationality women lacked, so the categories of woman and artist mutually excluded each other. The generation of women writers preceding the Progressive era solved this impossibility to combine the traditional role of wife and mother with the one of artist by choosing the anti-artistry path; they remained domestic writers, producing writings that claimed to be simple and useful and not works of art. On the other hand, the turn of the

century, with its widespread social activism, opened new possibilities to women who finally broke with the heritage of domestic writing and managed, by means of their novels, to highlight the structural and material limitations that women artists faced when attempting to achieve critical success in inequitable marriages and social codes that restricted their mobility, education, and pursuit of vocation.

Their literary works focused on a network of common themes concerning issues of power. They tended to tackle the experiences of female characters, the dilemma of domesticity and the social implications of their defiance against society. However, these subjects were considered minor and trivial by critics and academics who were engaged in the construction of the American literary canon, and that was based on the assumption that men are more predisposed to engage in nationally and ethically relevant themes than women, who are instead more prone to deal with private and domestic matters. Hence women could finally become members of the literary community, but they were left at its margins (Karcher, 1994).

As a matter of fact, the field of American literature was dominated by men and, with the emergence of women as writers, they worried about the feminization of literature. Through their control of the literary canon, they rejected feminine topics which contrasted with what was instead reputed to be literary greatness, that is themes perceived as typically American, connected with the defining of the nation. Fundamentally, men's anxiety about traditional masculinity mirrored their desire to exclude women from the literary canon to maintain their once undiscussed superiority at least in one domain.

Even though this attempt was managed, women writers never stopped claiming the territory of art. They were withal placed between two worlds they did not fully belong to: a past of inequality and submission, and a future where, even if they had liberated from the constrictions that had affected women writers before them and forced them to renounce artistry, they had to adapt and to find their forms, types, and subjects of writing in a canon which had been shaped by men.

For this reason, almost paradoxically to their call for artistic equality, there was a tendency on the part of women to not identify themselves as 'women writers' but rather as 'writers' because they did not want to be dismissed as inferior on the basis of their sex; they did not want sex to interfere with their artistic abilities. Initially, the use of pen names was necessary as women could not challenge their domestic role, but now that it was

possible to sign books with their own names, many women still relied on pseudonyms so that they were sure to gain a readership in case the audience was suspicious of women writers, especially if they didn't write sentimental or domestic novels.

One way to respond to the literary discrimination was in fact to experiment, to try new forms outside of the existing and sexist categories, not following the flow, but being original. Yet, most women writers chose, as Elizabeth Ammons states in *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*, "not to rebel but to appropriate, remodel, take on the high-culture western novel as it had been crafted by the great English European masters, primarily white men, and claim it as their own." (Ammons, 1992: 158).

Overall, despite women writers at the turn of the century were not deemed worthy of entering the canon because, as American literature as a respectable academic field was born together with the figure of the professor, men instituted themselves as the chief authority of the literary canon, they succeeded in the production of high-art fiction, making the novel their own property, and their greatness was ultimately acknowledged.

1.3 Edith Wharton and the indictment of New York

Born in New York City on January 24, 1862, Edith Newbold Jones is one of the most important international female writers of the early 20th century and the first woman to ever be awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Literature. Descending from Anglo-Dutch merchant families who had established New York society, her parents were wealthy members of the haute bourgeoisie and lived between New York and Newport. Soon after Edith's birth, they travelled to Europe, settling for brief periods of time in Italy, Spain, Germany, and France, where Edith learned most of the languages, as well as being inspired by their culture which would shape her personality and lifestyle throughout her entire life. In 1885 she got married to Edward Robbins Wharton, of her same social class, with whom she settled initially in Newport, then in New York and finally in Lenox, Massachusetts, and continued travelling every year to Europe. Eventually, her husband's mental illness got worse and, as the marriage had already proved to be unsatisfactory, she decided to establish herself in France. In 1914, with the outbreak of World War 1, she moved to Paris and helped with the French war effort until the end of the conflict. In 1913 she

divorced and permanently settled in France; she kept travelling abundantly and went back to America only on two occasions before her death on August 11, 1937.

Being a member of a socially prominent family of Old New York, she was raised following proper conduct rules and instructed in the art of domestic management; it was her mother, in particular, who trained her to become a respectable woman of the upper-class, but she was so severe and deprecatory that she was resented by her daughter, who would base despicable literary characters on her. However, despite being shaped by the conservative doctrines of the time, Wharton was also part of the new century with its demand for female emancipation towards creativity and artistry. In fact, as a child she rejected many of the conventions imposed on her and demonstrated a peculiar propension for inventing stories and writing them down, a disposition which she called 'making up' and that was probably her way to cope with a reality that was oppressing and unendurable. She read voraciously, even from her father's library, but was strictly forbidden to read novels without her mother's consent. Already at an early age, she wrote stories focusing on the social and domestic scene and used a comic mode, the starting point for her future affirmation as a writer of social satires. She also composed poetry and was allowed by her parents to publish her poems under false name, since it was her mother's belief, as society's, that intellectual ability in women was to be acknowledged and rewarded as long as it did not compromise their domestic role.

It was this conception which Wharton struggled all her life against. It was a popular belief that artists are more unstable and vulnerable than other people, especially women who, with their pursuit of a literary career contrasting with their proclaimed predisposition for motherhood and domesticity, could suffer from psychological breakdowns. Wharton indeed experienced several major episodes of illness which debilitated her health and eventually caused her death, but they were the result of her difficulties to affirm herself as a professional writer in a frivolous society that made her miserable. However, they contributed to the perception of herself as different and defective which, paired with her mother's harsh treatment of her, were responsible for her challenging development. Yet, she defied her mother and started to broaden her cultural and intellectual knowledge, expressing it in her writing, but to maintain the appearance of fulfilling society's expectations she kept this activity completely private and separated from her social life. Old New York's society matrons, being the authority on female

etiquette and proper conduct, disapproved of her literary quest and protested her treatment of society's traditions and rituals in her books. Being betrothed to a man she met before her husband, she was even accused of having broken the engagement on the basis of her relentless literary ambition. Facing all these class prejudices about her, she began doubting her skills and self-confidence and kept constructing her way to artistry very slowly, publishing her first story at 29 years old of age, but she never let these attitudes completely stop her. Not only did she pursue her dream, but she used her personal life and the obstacles she faced as the principal subject of her literary works (Benstock, 1994: 3-22).

She wrote as a means to cope with the complex social reality that surrounded her and

> […] met the challenge of her imaginative power by transforming the merely "visionary" into increasingly forceful works of art – by giving novelistic substance and rigor to the products of her fruitful creative self. She became not a dreamer, but a successful professional writer (Griffin Wolff, 1997: 30).

Among her productions, ranging from novellas, novels, short stories, and poetry to books on travel and design, cultural and literary criticism, and an autobiography, her most relevant ones are definitely the works of fiction. As already stated, she took inspiration from the world and people around her, turning New York's upper class and its changing values as the new century approached into her primary subject. Nobody more than her was qualified to deal with this topic: being herself a member of a Victorian aristocratic family, she was endowed with an insight into the doings and matters of the haute bourgeoisie. She could witness its world from the inside and at the same time, because of her defiant attitudes, she was able to perceive its contradictions and describe how it appeared from the outside (Goodwyn, 1990: 4).

Appearances are indeed a common thread running through her fiction: they constitute the essence of the beau monde, which held itself up as the authority on behavioral codes but was in fact found lacking in the observance of them. Its members demanded high standards of moral conduct from others when they were the first ones to not respect them. In spite of this inconsistency, they felt the need to present themselves as ideal citizens, consistently following the norms of propriety and decency and condemning those who did not. These latter were thought of as outcasts, judged as 'others', and even though they were not sentenced to any legal punishment, they were

ostracized by the other members of the upper class, fated to live the rest of their lives with a stain on their reputation they were not able to clear. Therefore, a single act of immorality in a society so close to its conventions and principles would prove to be fatal (Montgomery, 1998).

Another trope that lies behind most of Wharton's fictional stories is that of women's place in society and the question of the woman artist. Like many female writers of her time, she was convinced that gender did not play a role in the definition of oneself as an artist. She believed in men and women's equal artistic abilities, but as the production of art had always been a male privilege, she asked herself in what way she could be at the same time an artist and a woman. Many critics think that she solved this problem by distancing herself from her characters from the narrative point of view, so as not to be identified with the typical feminine narrative which was considered minor and inferior to that of men. Still, there are other clues in her works that signal an opposite tendency, such as her treatment of women's challenges and deprivations in a patriarchal society (Ammons, 1991: 276).

She explored these themes principally in her novels of manners, meaning novels which objectively describe a specific class of people in every aspect of their life. Being friends with Henry James, she was often regarded as his female counterpart and imitator, dealing with the same social set of Old New York; yet she used a different style and closely associated her characters to the environment in which they lived. The protagonists of her novels are almost always women from different social classes who try to assert their place in a society that controls their lives and limits their public actions.

At the heart of her analysis, Wharton placed the institution of marriage and its limitations, investigating how they might lead either to divorce or adultery. She was herself very aware of the opportunities and hardships women faced in everyday life and described how these evolved with the changes happening at the end of the century. Even though Wharton's attitude towards marriage and love affairs was variable because she reasoned on the individual situations, in the majority of cases she saw divorce positively, as a liberation of the woman from male oppression. She also wrote numerous stories in which women engage in extramarital affairs in a time in which they were strictly condemned, thus she was criticized as having audacious ideas, especially for a society matron as she was. She did not necessarily approve of these love relationships, not

because she thought they were morally wrong, but because the social consequences women would face over such actions were too harsh, but the simple fact of presenting them as a possible option to women, paired with her acceptance of divorce, shows how advanced Wharton's mentality was for her time.

The women characters of her novels are strong and independent, for as long as their independence is allowed, and they struggle to break free from society's conventions, but they never fully overcome them and remain prisoners of patriarchy. They are initially represented as the weak gender, but later in the story they prove to be more tenacious than men, who are instead passive and indecisive. This opposition in the characters' temperament is one of Wharton's techniques of demonstrating women's actual capabilities and of indicating her despise for male supremacy, highlighting how men are granted privileges they do not deserve, at least not more than women. Another one is the use that she makes of stereotypes and prejudices. By presenting women with traditional attributes and afterward ironizing on those same characteristics, she uses stereotypes to actually demystify them and to emphasize the hypocrisy lying behind, and breaks down established conventional tenets regulating women's role in society. According to Margaret McDowell, "The exact nature of Edith Wharton's feminism resists easy definition. […] But it is possible to deduce from her work her feminist concerns, which thus tend to be cumulative and implicit rather than explicit" (McDowell, 1974: 523).

In all her works, Wharton advocated for women rights and denounced men's exploitation of them by means of satirical tone; however, antithetically, she also tended to look at everyone, regardless of gender, with empathy and compassion, understanding that the reasons driving their behavior might be influenced by external factors they had no control over. This proves that, contrary to many critics' belief, she did not simply and shallowly represent the New York upper class of her epoch; instead, she condemned its hypocrisy and bigotry, and more largely, she was concerned with the social realm and conscious of gender issues. Wharton realistically depicted the American social scene of the time which left a small, if not non-existent, degree of freedom to the female gender (McDowell, 1974).

CHAPTER 2

Wharton's recollection of the past in *The Age of Innocence*

2.1 Fantasy or reality? Newland Archer's construction of May Welland and Ellen Olenska

Published in 1920 in Paris but set in the New York of the 1870s, the period of Wharton's childhood, *The Age of Innocence* is Wharton's most famous novel, which won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1921. The story focuses on the character of Newland Archer, a young leisure-class lawyer engaged to May Welland, another member of the upper class. Their union becomes threatened by the arrival in New York of May's cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska, who has fled Europe because of her unhappy marriage with a Polish count. Seeking a divorce, she is followed by Newland in the case, but he becomes more of an adviser of New York's traditions and customs, of which Ellen is not aware and therefore publicly defies. Newland is attracted by Ellen's unconventionality and foreignness, the opposite to May's innocence and predictability, and soon the two fall in love, but the consummation of their passion is prevented by duty and social conventions, which eventually make Newland marry May and never be unfaithful. The last chapter of the novel sees a shift in time of 26 years, where Newland is offered by one of his children the possibility to re-meet with Ellen in Paris, but, even if he travels to the city, when he finds himself outside Ellen's house, he chooses not to see her.

From the beginning of the novel, readers are provided with essential information about Newland Archer and the New York in which he lives. Although he undergoes significant changes throughout the novel, in the first chapters he is presented as a conventional member of the upper class, to whom "what was or was not not 'the thing' played a part as important […] as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago" (Wharton, 1994: 3-4) and who considers 'taste' and 'form' as the higher powers of society. In this regard, the novel is full of comments such as "It was, at any rate, *in better taste not to* go to the ball" (AI, 25), or "Nothing could be *in worse taste than* misplaced flippancy" (AI, 12). At the same time, Newland believes to be morally better than other people because, through his travels and books, he

has developed a broader knowledge of the world and can look at things with a different point of view; however, tradition and convention always prevail: "in spite of the cosmopolitan views on which he prided himself, he thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind" (AI, 21).

This insight into Newland's thoughts is achieved through a third-person narration which focuses on Newland's consciousness, so that the events of the story can be presented from an external point of view but almost always be filtered by Newland's perspective. This narrative choice on the part of Wharton is not casual, instead it is a means to reveal the limits of Newland's knowledge and hypocrisy, which he prides himself to be able to see in others but does not actually recognize in himself (Kozloff, 2001: 274).

The most evident use that Wharton makes of this 'double' narrator applies to the characters of May Welland and Ellen Olenska, whose internal life is never revealed if not by the way Archer sees them, and therefore makes the reader see them too. May is the perfect representation of the female ideal in New York high society, both in physical appearance and values: she has fair hair and skin and an athletic body, and she is pure and naïve, all attributes that make her be referred to as the goddess Diana, emblem of virginity. Her innocence is also reflected in the candid flowers Newland buys her every morning, the lilies-of-the-valley, and in the clothes she wears, white and always appropriate for the social contest. In spite of these qualities which Newland is proud to show of his fiancée, he believes they are the only ones she possesses, that below the surface she is hollow, empty, without any knowledge of the real world. He starts to look at her this way especially after meeting Ellen, who makes him put into question every aspect of his, and society's life he had previously accepted as natural and subscribed to. Paradoxically, he does not want May to depend on someone else's judgement, but believes it is his responsibility to enlighten her, to "take the bandage" (AI, 53) from her eyes, and even worries that even by doing so there might be nothing behind them. Indeed, he recognizes that May is the product of society,

> so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow. (AI, 30)

Archer understands society's mechanisms, but still complies to them because he too has been brought up to have a predetermined role he cannot avoid fulfilling. As a result of his incapacity to escape society, he creates another dimension to his life, an imaginary and fantastical one, to which Ellen and May both belong, but then he is entrapped even in this other reality, unable to recognize that he continuously deceives himself.

As a matter of fact, May is not as innocent and childlike as Newland imagines her. She is aware of Newland's feelings for Ellen, as well as women's functional upbringing in society, as she tries to tell him when discussing about anticipating their marriage: "You mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices—one has one's feelings and ideas" (AI, 95). She is perceptive and intuitive, as she demonstrates when finding Newland's request to anticipate their wedding abrupt and odd. Believing he could still be in love with a woman he previously had had an affair with, she even gives him the chance to break the engagement because she is in truth capable of ignoring social codes when she imagines it necessary for one's freedom (Hutchinson, 2000: 441). Despite the initial shock at this revelation of May as a wiser girl able to think for herself, when Archer sees that "she seemed to have descended from her womanly eminence to helpless and timorous girlhood" (AI, 96), he immediately assumes that her wisdom was just a passing moment and only dictated by her automatic defense of the principles she had been trained to follow. Everything that *seems* to Newland as real, he *takes* for real, even if it is not (Witherow, 2003: 175-177).

The entire novel is full of references to May's intelligence and cunningness, the most evident ones when she uses her grandmother's stroke as an excuse to delay Archer's departure for Boston, where he intends to see Ellen, and when she tells Ellen she is pregnant before being certain of it, and omits the detail when informing Newland about their conversation. The reader's discernment of May's real personality is possible only because of the dissonance between the narrative perspectives of the story: while one is Newland's, who casts upon May the role of the pure and conformist girl because he does not want to acknowledge the same ignorance and passiveness of himself, the other is the author's, Wharton herself, who disseminates the novel with evidence of May's moral strength, particularly through the description of her physical countenance and eyes, often defined as 'light' and 'clear', symbolizing her ability to understand reality, in opposition

to Newland's 'blindness' to it. However, it is not always easy to distinguish these two narrators, and readers are often victim of believing Archer's construction of women characters if they do not pay attention to details (Fracasso E., 1991).

In the same way Newland does not know the true nature of May, he fails to completely understand Ellen Olenska. Ellen is the complete opposite to May: associated by Newland to the yellow roses, symbol of her boldness and sexual appeal, she is an older lady with antithetical physical features, American by birth but completely Europeanized in tastes and manners as a consequence of her unconventional upbringing and her living abroad for a long time. Because of that, she has seen and experienced a lot more than May, who has never left America and does not know a culture different from her own. Ellen is wise and independent; she is also compassionate and kind, but she is too unconventional and atypical for old New York. For instance, she smokes, lives alone, and wears dresses that are too revealing or conspicuous, transgressing clothing rules that in America are regarded as a symbol of class distinction and are a fundamental part of tradition. Even if she does not defy society's conventions on purpose, she is criticized for every time she breaks one, and ostracized by most members of the upper class. It is exactly this diversity and eccentricity that attracts Newland and challenges his perception of American society. Likewise, Ellen is attracted to Newland because he guides her to understand the complex conventions and rituals of New York, allowing her to feel a sense of stability and order which lacks in her European life. While initially she feels this way, she slowly realizes that it is better to look out for oneself than adhering to New York's false values and present a façade to hide the 'unpleasant'. Newland too becomes increasingly tired of the word:

> "Yes; but it might make some unpleasant talk if he really defends the suit."
>
> "Unpleasant—!" said Archer explosively. (AI, 64)

and of maintaining decency at the expense of his natural drives, but even by recognizing that, he cannot rebel and act as he would like; even his own assertions betray that the open-mindedness and radical thoughts he believes separate him from his fellow citizens are just apparent. The simple declaration that he is "sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots" (AI, 27) can summarize the double standard of his supposed fair treatment of the sexes, as he defends

Ellen from being designated as a prostitute, while he thinks the same in the case of other women.

Archer's hypocrisy emerges especially in his exchanges with Ellen, such as when he suggests that they should free themselves from their partners so that they can be together, when it was him who had previously advised her against a divorce because it would have caused a scandal. Similarly, he finds himself exclaiming "women ought to be free, as free as we are" (AI, 27) to Mr. Letterblair about Ellen, yet he does not understand that what she means by saying she wants to be free, is that she wants to have complete autonomy from her husband; instead, he thinks she wants to remarry because he takes for granted that a woman needs a man to support her. In more than an occasion he even looks at her "as an exposed and pitiful figure, to be saved at all costs" (AI, 62), despite knowing she can take care of herself (Miller Hadley, 1991: 266).

Archer desires a marriage with a woman his equal, able to understand and communicate with him honestly, without all the "twists and defences of an instinctive guile" (AI, 30), and sees that equal in Ellen. However, they do not speak the same language, but while Ellen recognizes it, Archer fails to do so. He knows New Yorkers "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" (AI, 29), but he too never honestly communicates, and instead acts according to formalities. He initially believes May and him can communicate just by an exchange of looks, and that he could always guess what she was thinking or what she was going to do, but later forgets that May *too* can understand him without the need of uttering words, and never finds out she had always known of his love for Ellen until after her death. He would also like to live in a world where he can create his own language with Ellen, where words like 'mistress' do not exist. He wants to escape reality because he knows he is not strong enough to rebel against it, so he constructs an imaginary world, a fantasy in which he protects himself from the harshness of reality. As Ekaterini Kottaras writes in her analysis of the metaphorical language that rules Archer's life, "Archer has no grasp of reality; he is seeped in the fantastical drama of his own life, of the false front under which he has lived for so long" (Kottaras, 2010: 15). This fog that dims his eyes prevents him from envisaging the women of his life for who they really are (Kottaras, 2010: 11-13).

With regard to May, in his attempt to conceal from her his romantic pursuit of Ellen, he is the one who is actually deceived (hence the astute title of the novel, which proves to be extremely ironic since the only 'innocent' character of the story is precisely Newland): May has known all along of Newland's true feelings and has been able, always maintaining decency, to send Ellen back to Europe to impede their relationship. As for Ellen, Newland will never succeed in uniting/staying together with her because he has placed her as the object of that fantasy, which for the name itself signifies it is something impossible to realize. However, he cannot distinguish anymore between reality and fantasy, as when Ellen tells him "we'll look, not at visions, but at realities" (AI, 183) and he replies "I don't know what you mean by realities. The only reality to me is this" (AI, 183).

Symbolic of the dreamy atmosphere in which Newland lives is his library and the readings he does there, romantic stories and poetry, which contribute to his viewing of women as characters of books. Even if May reminds him they "can't behave like people in novels" (AI, 53), Newland needs to categorize women, to assign them to a fixed role, so he stereotypes May as the conforming and pure girl, "so incapable of growth" (AI, 220), and Ellen as the woman of experience, a seductress surrounded by mystery. Readers initially see them in the same way, but with a deeper reading they find signs of Wharton's critique of Newland's objectification. The women characters of *The Age of Innocence* are indeed human beings, not types, with a sharper knowledge of the world than expected by Newland; they actually understand the symbolic language that rules their lives and see that Archer is immersed in his delusion. Ellen is in the real sense of the word a better 'reader': her house is full of books on naturalism, which focuses on the objective portrayal of the world and rejects romanticism, the literary movement that Newland most favors. May too is aware of Newland's misperception of her and uses it to her convenience, ultimately as a way to trick him into giving up Ellen for the sake of their marriage (Orlando, 1998: 67-71).

The Opera is another emblematic setting of the novel, representing at large New York's high society's dishonesty, deceptiveness, and triviality. The story starts indeed during a night at the Opera, one of New York's favorite places for sociability, and one of the few public spaces where women in the 19th century were allowed to participate and to expose themselves to society's gaze. Of course, only respectable women of the upper

class had this privilege, so the appearance of Ellen Olenska, an eccentric woman with a disputable reputation, is considered by members of the upper class – who judge themselves as arbiters of taste and form – shocking and excessive, even if she is supported by her family. The fact that this event causes a great stir among the gentlemen in one of the opera boxes indicates how superficial the play actually is, how it is used as an excuse to look at others and commentate upon their lifestyle and conduct. Performance at the Opera in the novel has therefore a double nature: the one of the play, with the actors on the stage, and the one of its spectators, simultaneously showing ('performing') themselves, wearing elegant clothes and jewels demonstrating their wealth, and observing others (Kottaras, 2010: 11-12).

Wharton uses the Opera as a metaphor for the metaphorical language itself that constitutes the nature of high society in America, as in the following passage:

> She sang, of course, "M'ama!" and not "he loves me," since an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences. (AI, 4)

This practice is representative not only of the distance from authenticity and truth, dismissed just because unadaptable and inconvenient, but also of the absurdity of some of America's traditions and how difficult it was to challenge them since "This seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was moulded" (AI, 4). Newland is indeed incapable of escaping convention, even if he understands its absurdity and wants to free himself from it. He has lived for so long in the atmosphere of "faint implications and pale delicacies" (AI, 11) that he is bound to them and like an actor on a stage, he must perform according to a script and rules he cannot ignore. Because the system he so desperately wants to evade has already shaped his identity and inclinations, he unconsciously feels safe in it, where he recoils from the unpleasantness of what is different and unknown. This is the reason why he cannot concretize his love for Ellen: he is fascinated by her because she personifies the freedom he does not possess in his country, but he is in fact afraid of leaving the security of tradition for the unpredictability of the new. On that account, paradoxically, he advises Ellen against divorce because he wants to avoid defamation of her sexual experience, he wants "to cover her with innocence" (Jessee, 2012: 42), although he despises that same innocence in his betrothed May.

Newland's continuous attempts to find the truth about Olenski's allegations are one of Wharton's ways of inviting readers to reflect upon Ellen's real story, to make them see beyond Newland's perception of her. Despite some critics having condemned Wharton for her creation of May as an ignorant and gullible girl, she is always described so by Newland and not by Wharton, who on the contrary constantly underlines his misinterpretation of women. In his character, she reproduces men's propensity for women's typification, especially in the two prototypes of the woman as child, who is represented by May, and the femme fatale, represented by Ellen. Wharton uses Newland to condemn the stereotyped positions to which American women were assigned in the 19th century, and by regularly addressing the reality of May and Ellen's existence, she advocates for the rejection of the notion that women must be subordinate to men because of their weakness and inexperience (Miller Hadley, 1991: 264-266).

2.2 America vs. Europe and Ellen as artist

> Though there was already talk of the erection, in remote metropolitan distances "above the Forties," of a new Opera House which should compete in costliness and splendour with those of the great European capitals, the world of fashion was still content to reassemble every winter in the shabby red and gold boxes of the sociable old Academy. (AI, 3)

In the first chapter of the novel, Wharton uses the Opera setting to compare the continents of Europe and America and their culture, hinting at Europe's finer cultural landmarks, such as the beauty of the Opera Houses which Americans tried to reproduce in their country. Another important subject in *The Age of Innocence* is indeed the contrast between these two continents, a topic dear to Edith Wharton who, despite being American by birth and having lived most of her life in America, was definitely European at heart. In her early years spent travelling abroad she discovered that European culture, in particular the French one, was more fit for her peculiar inclination to artistry and literary creativity, and her personality would in fact be influenced by it. Coming back to America, she found that it was a stricter and more conservative society, particularly for women. She realized how ridiculous and shallow its customs were, so she became convinced that European civilizations and their culture were superior and more refined than America's. In the novel, the author satirizes some of the odd traditions of old New York in the attempt to unveil its hypocrisy and underline the inherent freedom of Europeans compared to the

enslavement of Americans to convention and tradition. One remarkable example is the van der Luydens' dinner party, where Ellen and the Duke of St. Austrey are the only representatives of European royalty. As such, they should be the ones concerned with the adherence to the old-fashioned rules of society; instead, they not only disregard them, but also seem oblivious to their existence: the Duke is dressed with "shabby and baggy" (AI, 40) clothes and converses with Ellen even if he should first have paid respects to other guests, and Ellen arrives late, even when the dinner had been appositely organized for her, and walks alone towards Newland when she should have waited for him to come to her. On the other hand, the New Yorkers are the ones who look at and commentate upon every transgression of formalities, for instance Ellen's participation to Mrs. Struthers' Sunday parties where people danced, smoked, and drank champagne. The event is regarded as scandalous not only because of a buoyant behavior, but also since Ellen, despite being Europeanized, is an American by birth, so she must respect the traditions of her country and not care for others. However, Mrs. Struthers parties are a place where Ellen feels at home, with intellectuals and artists, and a bohemian spirit so averse to New York, which even Archer acknowledges was "dying of inanition" (AI, 56).

Another way of Wharton's calling into question the standards of old New York is through the pairing of architectural and decorative elements with characters with European or American tastes. Besides literature, another field of interest in Wharton's life was architecture and design. She wrote manuals on the matter, and even contributed to the projects of her own American residences. She believed that the environment people inhabited was a manifestation of their physical and psychological traits, so a recurring theme in her fictions is the relationship between characters and their houses. During the last years of the 19th century, the architectural tendency in America was to create buildings which were distinctly American, in order to generate a distance from the European forms of art and create their own national identity, but Wharton supported the opposite view, that of reproducing European forms without altering them. Consequently, in *The Age of Innocence* she approved of those characters who lived in a European setting, namely Mr. Beaufort, Mrs. Mingott and Ellen Olenska, and denounced those who were fond of American adornments (Falk, 2001: 19-24).

Mr. Beaufort is known in the fictional New York of the novel as a libertine of uncertain English origins, who has "the habit of two continents and two societies" (AI,

88). His house presents some European features, especially a nude from a French painter which is judged too explicit a painting to be exposed in an American living room. Because of his European provenance carrying with itself a dissolute lifestyle and contempt for society's morals, he is the only man of the novel who can truly know Ellen's feelings. He "understood every turn of her dialect, and spoke it fluently" (AI, 88). Newland pins him as his opponent in Ellen's pursuit because he recognizes that he has a charm and allure to himself Ellen could understand and be fascinated by, but what he does not understand is that Ellen does not necessarily look for a man and, as much as she enjoys Beaufort's company, she rejects his continuous advances because she would never be part of an adulterous relationship (Witherow, 2003: 169-170).

As for Mrs. Mingott, she lives in "a large house of pale cream-coloured stone (when brown sandstone seemed as much the only wear as a frock-coat in the afternoon) in an inaccessible wilderness near the Central Park." (AI, 9). Not only her house presents a peculiar coloration going against the architectural norm, but she also chose to settle in the outskirts of New York instead of the conventional quarters. Her nonconformist attitude shows also in the interiors of the house: because of her enormous weight, she found it practical to move her bedroom downstairs, going against New York's etiquette. Through Mrs. Mingott's words Wharton even explicitly addresses Americans as 'simple' in their imagination of a setting so different from the ones they are used to.

While Mrs. Mingott is conscious and pleased that her residence distinguishes itself from the rest, Ellen is not aware that her settling alone down West 23rd Street, where the intellectuals live, is regarded as 'not fashionable' and therefore not appropriate for a lady. Yet, the fact that she established herself in the same quarter of artists and writers, who "had never shown any desire to be amalgamated with the social structure" (AI, 65) underlines her acquaintance with artistry and her inherent rejection of social conventions in favor of independence. The intimate decoration of her little house also recalls foreign associations and her way of disposing flowers, which strucks Mr. Van der Luyden when he goes to visit her, demonstrates her artistic bent.

On the other hand, the van der Luydens' New York house presents some European antiquities, such as the painting of Luisa van der Luyden's ancestress, but the couple undoubtedly favors American models. This is almost ironic considering that America does not have an aristocracy in the real sense of the word if not by means of descendance

from the European one, so one would expect the van der Luydens, who are related to Dutch, British and French nobles, to vaunt their origin by surrounding themselves with European objects, which they instead scorn. The 'fear' of foreigners and of foreign ways is one of Wharton's most condemned arguments (Falk, 2001: 28-34).

> Because Wharton so often exalted French and other European artistic and social expressions and challenged American ideas and tastes in her works of nonfiction and in her autobiography, her architectural descriptions in *The Age of Innocence* clearly demonstrated her positive assessment of the indecorous characters Mingott and Olenska. By associating foreign items with two women judged imprudent by old New York standards, Wharton indicated that old New York society was mistaken in its definition of what was proper and what was improper. […] One reason that Wharton gave such a strong endorsement to French culture and, consequently, French architecture concerned the powerful, mature positions she felt women were able to attain in that country. (Falk, 2001: 39)

As she wrote in *French Ways and Their Meaning*, a collection of essays and articles, Wharton believed that the French woman, although she had fewer legal rights than the American, was fundamentally more emancipated than her, and possessed a maturity the latter lacked (Olin-Ammentorp 1992: 16). The characters of May and Ellen are illustrative to this idea. Ellen is more self-reliant and cosmopolitan, her foreignness emerges even in her writing and speech, but more than everything, she belongs to a world that is too culturally and passionately rich for it to not become a threat to May's world of purity. Regardless, Ellen envies the order and tranquillity of Old New York, but she also understands that it is based on deceitfulness and bigotry, and willingly chooses not to conform to its imperatives. Her ability to take decisions for herself is also part of her artistic personality. She regards art as characterized by what she calls 'the imprèvu', an ever-changing and unexpected act she seeks in "dramatic artists, singers, actors, musicians" (AI, 68), contrary to Newland's "painters" (AI, 68) whose products are static and motionless, mirroring New York's conventionality and immovability. Moreover, Ellen's art is an expression of her creative personality: she does not conform to the mass, but rather singles out, as she declares to Newland while talking about her place of living: "Fashionable! Do you all think so much of that? Why not make one's own fashions?" (AI, 47). On the contrary, Newland's and the rest of New York's conception of art is that it is just a commodity, a way to display wealth, which turns out as a metaphor for America's lack of real expression of the internal life (Trammell Skaggs, 2004: 56-57). Despite being the real artist between the two, Ellen is seen by Newland as an 'objet d'art'. He often describes her as if she were an ethereal creature, he fetishizes her hand, contemplating it

as an idol of her beauty, and even compares her to paintings. Wharton clearly undermines Newland's objectification of the woman as symptom of his incapacity to look at reality, to visualize rather than see (Orlando, 1998: 59-66).

Regarding May, she is less worldly and courageous than Ellen. She follows her parents' guide to navigate the world and has ordinary hobbies and interests. As much as she demonstrates capable of disregarding conventions in particular occasions, she feels their burden and does not act freely. Besides, she "had not the dimmest notion that she was not free" (AI, 123). Newland's statement might be part of his construction of May as innocent, but it is undeniable that her limited knowledge of the world, though the result of her conventional upbringing rather than an internal disposition, prevents her from understanding completely her submissive position in society. Her house represents the stifling atmosphere surrounding American citizens, such as when Newland feels the need to open the window to catch some air, and when, imagining how their future house would be, finds comfort in the fact that he would probably arrange his own library. He regards that room as a space for himself, where he can carry over his readings and be immersed in a romantic atmosphere. Given that Newland marries May despite his love for Ellen thanks to May's conspiracy, her house is also representative of the power of domesticity that can save the man from the moral corruptions he is exposed to (Miller Hadley, 1991: 269).

Once again, in Wharton's novel the house, with its rooms and ornaments, proves exemplary of a person's character; it reflects her idea that human beings and their emotions are connected to the physical space where they live. Hence, the environment has the power to influence the characters. In light of this reflection, Newland's decision to not see Ellen in the final pages of the novel can be considered positive since the French atmosphere that surrounds her would have been "too dense and yet too stimulating for his lungs" (AI, 227). Wharton's positioning of Newland in his library in the final chapter is emblematic of his endless fascination with the romantic and the imaginary (Falk, 2001: 35-42).

2.3 Culture and the self

Opera nights, private dinners, strolls on Fifth Avenue at the fashionable hour, dinner at 7 o'clock, after-dinner calls. These are just some of the many fixed rituals of the fictional New York's upper class of *The Age of Innocence*. But that fiction is not just a fiction: Edith Wharton had lived the life of her novel's characters years before they were created, so she knew the inner workings of high society so well that she could recreate them exactly as they were in a fictional work of literature. She has indeed used her own life experiences to bring into existence the novel's characters, especially those of Newland Archer, May Welland and Ellen Olenska, who are based off different parts of her personality in different periods of her life.

Having written the novel in 1920, almost in her 60s, she had the removed time perspective to reflect upon her past and hand out her thoughts on American society. Having herself lived in such a context, despite its negative aspects which she has notably addressed in her literary works, she could not completely renounce the system she grew up in, so in the novel she is both a defender of old New York and its fiercest attacker. As she wrote in her biography, *A Backward Glance*, writing the novel she "found a momentary escape in going back to my childish memories of a long-vanished America" (Wharton, *A Backword Glance*, quoted in Fryer, 1984: 155). The title *The Age of Innocence* indeed recalls an imaginary era of harmlessness and incorruptibility that starkly contrasts with the horrors of the Great World War that Wharton saw in first person (maybe this is also the reason why she did not want to deal with the Civil War, which is in fact overlooked in the novel). Therefore, the thing she most envied about the past was society's stillness and order that were maintained thanks to the adherence to tradition. However, that same tradition repressed the individual freedom and punished those who tried to despise or defy it, an aspect of which Wharton became conscious only after having left the continent.

> The writer became increasingly aware of the influence on her thoughts and actions of her country's social conventions after living in France, a country with different social and moral values. Wharton reports her own evolution through Newland Archer's reading of anthropology and social theory, his observations of society, his awareness of the artificiality of its norms, and finally his acceptance of their social necessity. (Asya, 1997: 17)

Anthropology plays indeed an important role in the novel, as well as in Wharton's opinion it can do the same in people's lives. By making Archer share her own interest in the human condition and its studies, she is able to create a narrative voice that employs ethnographical terminology, which she uses to criticize and deride New York's community. This last is described as extremely self-centred and preoccupied only with the preservation of its traditions, without any interest for the rest of the world and consequently for everything that comes with difference and change; its people are materialists, unable to care about higher forms of life such as literature, art, and music. For as much as New Yorkers seem to be very passionate about the Opera by systematically attending its spectacles, the way the scene of the annual attendance of *Faust* is portrayed indicates how repetitive and dull this ceremony is, with its participants knowing the play by heart and therefore not paying attention to it. Their attendance is justified only by their will to conform to the mass, to respect the traditions Old New York carries on; they do not think for themselves nor act freely on their own. Such a behavior, extendable to every other social and even private domain, imprisons the city with stillness, monotony, and boredom.

> He was out of spirits and slightly out of temper, and a haunting horror of doing the same thing every day at the same hour besieged his brain.
>
> "Sameness—sameness!" he muttered, the word running through his head like a persecuting tune. (AI, 54)

New York inhabitants are paralyzed by routine, there is no will for progress, and new groups of people, such as the new rich, are excluded at all costs from the social rituals, while change in society is looked at as disgraceful. To this regard, the anthropologic terminology implied by Wharton is strikingly functional as it refers many times to Old New York's figures of power as archaic people surrounded by a lifeless atmosphere. For instance, Mrs. Mingott is a corpulent old lady whose social influence is exercised uniquely from her remote house, alluding both at the pressure under which the city is "doomed" (AI, 18) and at the weakness of her authority, whose destiny can only be to deteriorate and disappear (Saunders, 2002: 89-93).

Throughout the novel there are hints at an imminent change in society and class structure, reported mainly by Mrs. Archer, who is concerned about the new clothing fashion she regards as too flamboyant. As ridiculous as it might seem, for Old New York's

society, which accepts dishonesty as long as it is concealed by an unblemished public demeanor, worrying about fashion rules reflects a larger anxiety over a bigger and more systematic change, since 'form' and 'taste' are considered the external manifestation of inner moral values. At the end of the novel, which sees a shift in time of nearly 30 years from the early 1870s, all of Mrs. Archer's concerns have become reality: society, together with its rules, customs, and fashions, has changed, and the haute bourgeoise that ruled Old New York has been replaced by a new generation who does not have the same interests and cares of the previous one. Even Newland acknowledges that there is a clear "distance that the world had travelled" (AI, 223), a distance that allows his son Dallas, embodiment of this other generation, to marry Beaufort's daughter, since nowadays "nobody was narrow-minded enough" (AI, 223) to give importance to her past. Even Mrs. Struthers' parties, which were once seen as too extravagant and giving free pass to dissolute behavior, not only are now accepted, but they have also become one of the regular social events of the city.

It is clear that the structure and mindset of the haute bourgeoise has adjusted to the approaching century, and although this could have been foreseen in Archer's youth, he remained blind to the prospect that the society rules he thought infrangible and that prevented his happiness might have not mattered in the future. As a consequence, he subscribed to them unquestionably and let them prevail over his own emotional fulfillment. One of Wharton's arguments in the book is precisely that there is a predestination in every human being's life, that the identity and course of events of an individual's life is inevitably influenced by their milieu. The separation between the single and the community commonly sees the latter as a stronger entity prevailing over the former, and Newland exemplifies this concept as the social mores he grew up with preclude his desires and restrain his individual agency. Before making any choice or action, he takes into consideration society and ponders how much he would fear the consequences of transgressing its codes, usually deciding upon the option which does not require him to challenge the public opinion. In reality, he does not consciously make the choices, because the principles and practices of the surrounding environment which have shaped his personality since he was born have cemented in his mind so solidly that he takes them for granted and does not doubt them. Newland's quick dismissal of May's proposal to rethink the marriage, his not even taking into consideration the possibility, is

the chief proof that, however intense a personal longing, it can never be placed above the collective needs. Newland is almost like a machine, functioning as it has been programmed to do by society without questioning anything, but with the only difference that he still has emotions and feels the burden of living a life already destined to unfold against his happiness.

This proves that, notwithstanding his continual retreat to convention, Newland is aware of his existential condition, an awareness he derives from his interest in anthropology. The readings he does in his library have the effect of expanding his knowledge of the world and of any other civilization that has a culture different from the one of Old New York. Contrary to every inhabitant of the city, who is certain of living in the center of the world where there are superior and exemplary customs, Newland not only accepts, but also cherishes the ways of living of other nations, often declaring he is interested in the art, architecture, and literature of European countries. On that account, the arrival in New York of Ellen Olenska, who is clearly converted to the French lifestyle, does nothing but enhance Newland's perception of New York as if he were a foreigner and his nonconformity to its ethnocentrism. Yet, this nonconformity is just a semblance – it works in words but not in deeds – since nobody can really flee a community. They are eternally bound to it and to its rules, no matter how irrelevant they might become in the future.

> "It seems cruel," she said, "that after a while nothing matters ... any more than these little things, that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labelled: 'Use unknown.'"
>
> "Yes; but meanwhile—"
>
> "Ah, meanwhile—" (AI, 195)

This scene at the museum, where Ellen and Newland discuss about surrendering to their passion, even if just for one night, is a powerful metaphor for the temporal inescapableness from society's laws: even supposing that the next generation might not care about the social values and standards of the present time, people living in that time would still live and be influenced by them. In other words, even by recognizing that current principles and traditions are not universal nor abiding, there is no actual possibility of completely breaking free from them. Nevertheless, having an anthropological knowledge, such as the one Newland and Ellen have, allows to see the deprivations in

which one lives and to have a higher degree of psychological freedom. Ellen is indeed more independent and unrestricted than the other characters of the novel because she has been in contact with other countries and their ways of living, acquiring the ability to look at things from different perspectives and to form a more original and creative identity, leading an equally original and creative life (Saunders, 2002: 97-99).

However, as previously mentioned, emancipation can never be fully realized, so Newland dreams many times of escaping that community, which he sees as the only choice to live a life without any restraint. It is interesting how the most important encounters between him and Ellen do not take place in New York but rather outside, such as in Boston or Newport, symbolizing how impossible his emotional fulfilment is in the city; yet the desire to abandon his birthplace is nothing but just another dream of his: "Emigrate! As if a gentleman could abandon his own country" (AI, 80). Being a fully-fledged citizen of Old New York, Archer feels the obligation to carry on the family name and prestige, so leaving the city also means deserting his role, which is not even a considerable option for him.

Newland's decision at the end of the book to not enter Ellen's apartment in Paris might initially strike readers with surprise, but with a more careful attention they can see that everything has led to the predictable finale, especially since at the beginning they learn that he is "at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realisation" (AI, 4). Newland thinks it best to preserve the beautiful memory of Ellen because he has already accepted his fate; furthermore, his marriage can be regarded as happy because it has secured him a stability and peacefulness he would have never experienced with Ellen (Arthos, 2000: 9).

"Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways" (AI, 219). Wharton's assessment about Newland's life can be considered her own opinion about Old New York. Because of everything that has already been considered, namely her ideas about society, anthropology, and gender stereotyping, in spite of her contempt, Wharton could never completely give up the community in which she was born and formed. Nonetheless, she chose to use her literary vocation to assess her ideas on the cultural values of her country, and to give expression to her feelings about it. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton uses the main characters to act out the different parts of her personality. To this regard, May represents Wharton's early

conformist behaviour and the future she would have followed had she never challenged the norms she was trained to comply to and left the continent. On the other hand, Ellen is the embodiment of the defiance against convention and some of her choices reflect the same ones Wharton made in her life, such as living abroad, leaving her husband, and committing adultery. In the same way Ellen has suffered the consequences of her actions and has become mindful that a society's norms and traditions can provide safety, Wharton was afflicted with the remorse of having succumbed to her aspirations rather than having fought them off, but came to the conclusion that, had she not chosen to violate the social and moral imperatives of her society, she would have never realized her state of conformity and submission to them. Lastly, Wharton establishes a parallel between the constructing evolution of her personality and Newland's thoughts and reflections on society that he derives from his anthropological readings (Asya, 1997: 17-19).

Still, in the character of Newland Archer, the author reproduces the entrapment of that same society, which led to the people of the time being unable to speak nor act freely. Wharton is sympathetic of Newland because she understands his human condition and knows there is little he can do to effectively liberate himself from it, but she still condemns him for his inability to express his feelings, and the generation he is part of as eternally engrossed in a language of deception. On the other hand, the new society that takes over at the end of the novel, when there is a shift in time from the early 1870s to the late 1890s, is not preoccupied with the same standards and frivolities, so it is free to think, speak and act on its own. Dallas epitomizes this new generation, but through the dialogues with his father, the reader can understand how it is actually characterized by the same failure at communication, although for the different reason that "People nowadays were too busy—busy with reforms and "movements," with fads and fetishes and frivolities" (AI, 223). The new ideas and technological progress brought about by the turn of the century set an opposition between the stillness of Old New York and the turmoil and confusion of this period, yet both generations do not possess the right means to communicate and are slaves to the impossibility to create meaningful relationships. The novel carries this idea over until the very end, when Newland is finally free to be with Ellen, but he is not capable of concretizing his love for her, remaining perpetually immersed in a metaphorical language that could do nothing but lead to a finale which is neither pessimistic nor happy, but just what it was naturally meant to be (Evron, 2012: 39).

CHAPTER 3

The House of Mirth: woman's life as tragedy

3.1 Consumer culture and the marriage market: Lily Bart as commodity

The House of Mirth is Wharton's first editorial success and bestseller, and the book that affirmed her as a novelist of manners. Contrary to *The Age of Innocence*, it was written in 1905 and set in the same year, covering a period of two years from it. This contemporaneity is the main reason for the great public interest: the events occurring to the literary characters reflect the same dynamics of the society of the time, raising critical debates in newspapers and magazines, especially over the veracity of the book's high society values, and over the destiny of its protagonist, Lily Bart.

The novel follows her continuous struggles to exist in a society she wants to be a part of but that at the same time, in a more latent way, she wishes to relinquish. Lily was born a member of the upper class, but being already 29 years old and still unmarried, and not being granted a regular allowance by her aunt, Mrs. Peniston, with whom she lives after her parents' death, she must find a husband if she wants to secure her status. Despite her aspiration, all her attempts at getting wealthy men's interest in her fail, and because the real love she feels for a middle-class lawyer, Lawrence Selden, does not guarantee her the lifestyle she wants to lead, she will remain alone and even an outcast, suffering the consequences of various social scandals she found herself in, and eventually committing suicide or accidentally dying due to a medication overdose.

New York's high society is again the subject of Wharton's literary fiction, but it is not the same society of *The Age of Innocence*, since the novel picks up at its end, the passage to the new century, when telephones, public transportation, electricity and other technological inventions are a common background in the novel's scenes, and when women have been allowed a greater access to the public sphere, with new public spaces having been constructed appositely for them. The result is that the nature of the leisure class has changed: while in Newland Archer's world women's occasions to present themselves to the public eye were to gather at the Opera, attend balls and private dinners, and to stroll outside at the fashionable hour, in Lily's world wealth must be displayed

more publicly, by dining at restaurants, taking part in society weekends outside the city, and attending larger entertainments where activities such as the tableaux vivants were arranged explicitly for the exhibition of the female body; all of this under the scrutinizing look of society journalists whose job was to inform in newspapers about the details of all social activities, spreading gossips which could cost dearly to a woman's reputation, as it happens exactly in the case of Lily (Montgomery, 1998: 10-11).

To understand the reason of Lily's downfall, it is first necessary to analyse her character and the motives which drive her actions, but most importantly, "the past out of which her present had grown" (Wharton, 1997: 25). Having been raised with the standards of the rich and having spent her childhood and adolescence in an atmosphere of incessant turmoil and amusements, Lily has an inherent desire for money and an appreciation of the life it brings. Moreover, given that it is the maternal figures who set the example for children's future behavior, Lily has interiorized her mother's attitude towards other lifestyles, learning to despise 'dinginess' and poverty as manifestations of moral debasement. At the same time, Lily would like to regard money with less fascination and to live independently and by higher values, following the choice of Selden's cousin, Gerty Farish. However, this alternative is not possible precisely because Gerty lives in dinginess and poverty, and Lily

> was too intelligent not to be honest with herself. She knew that she hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it, and to her last breath she meant to fight against it, dragging herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch. (HM, 34)

Consequently, Lily sees no existence for herself than the one where refinement and luxury would be her only surroundings. Anyhow, despite her aversion to a marriage based solely on monetary terms, achieving that position is possible only by associating with someone who already occupies it, that is to say, to marry a wealthy man.

As already discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, marriage in this epoch and for this class was not regarded as the consolidation of a bond of love between two people, but rather as a social and economic contract through which both parties could gain social and economic advantages. In the kind of society where Lily lives, almost nothing can be obtained without offering something valuable in return, so that everything is regulated by a system of exchange (Benstock, 1994: 370). Marriage is no exception to this law: it is a business-like arrangement where men put at stake their money and women their ability

to exhibit it. Having been in the marriage market for more than 10 years, Lily is very aware of its functioning and knows all too well that every action needs to be thought over, considering how it might benefit her purpose. Selden often underlines Lily's calculating and contriving personality, always preparing a scheme of action with the intent to capture the attention of the wealthy, as in the case of her pursuit of Mr. Gryce, when the apparent simple act of questioning Selden on the Americana collection was instead studied to be later used to engage in a conversation with Mr. Gryce. Still, Lily is also capable of instinctive actions, such as accepting Selden's offer to go to his apartment for a tea, which are not contemplated and therefore will prove fatal to her, demonstrating the commercial nature of the leisure class, where its members are not given the freedom of acting impulsively and carelessly, in other words, naturally. They are bound by unspoken rules of conduct, the defiance of which does not go unpunished, especially when one of the partakers in the transaction does not receive his share, as it happens with Gus Trenor. Having made Lily believe that he had invested her money when he was in truth giving her his own, Trenor was expecting something in return, in the form of sexual favors. Lily, who usually prides herself on her ability to manipulate others to get what she wants, this time forgot she must pay back whatever she obtains, resulting in Trenor's overt attempt at rape and in Lily's being associated with a harlot (Whal, 2009: 9-11).

The episode also represents Lily's epiphany to the true values of the haute bourgeoise, where civility is preserved only by the interest for power and wealth, and where behind the friendship and solidarity she believed united her with people of her social circle there is just self-interest and rudeness. Yet, it is not only between people of the same social class that there are no real emotional connections, but even between members of the same family, the most striking example of which being Lily's father. During her childhood, he was always away from home, so he never dedicated himself to the construction of a father-daughter bond, and when he *was* with his family, it was almost as if he did not exist; he seemed dead even before his actual death. The only thing linking him to his wife was the money he earned to pay for her extravagant life, so having lost it, "To his wife he no longer counted: he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfil his purpose" (HM, 29). The fact that Lily's father becomes ill and dies soon after having dissipated the family fortune serves as a warning of the ultimate fate of those struggling to live in the beau monde and is foretelling of Lily's own death at the end of the novel.

The ‘purpose’ Lily’s mother talks about is exactly men’s contribution to the marriage market, which is the ability to pay for the household, while women’s role is to make a show of their husband’s wealth by presenting to the public what that wealth can afford them, such as fancy clothes and expensive jewels. Even though in the culture of conspicuous leisure it is the woman who was considered a physical property to be exploited by men, the case of Lily’s father proves that men too could be taken advantage of, so both the sexes were designated to be objectified in the marriage market.

Being a commodity, Lily is essentially required to display herself, which she does indeed by means of her beauty, her most relevant social asset. She is also graceful, charming, and has refined tastes. Selden and the other men in the novel are attracted to her because of her power to make other women seem ordinary in her presence; thus, being seen with her or ultimately, possessing her, can provoke the envy of both other men and women, a considerable advantage in a society where a violent competition as to who is the most socially prominent dominates. However, while Lily uses her talent to attract all men’s attention, she refuses what that talent can ultimately bring about, that is the attention of a man in particular, a future husband, putting herself at risk of malicious talks (Wahl, 2009: 9-11).

The scene of the tableaux vivants is a pivotal moment for Lily’s social popularity. She accepts to take part in the event by figuring in a portrait by the famous English painter Sir Joshua Reynolds (the same artist from whom Wharton supposedly took inspiration for the title of *The Age of Innocence*), where she portrays a stunning woman, Mrs. Lloyd. The choice to perform in the last tableau and alone is significant of Lily’s will to make a spectacle of herself, wanting to stand out more than the other women participants, and speaks for her recognition of herself as an art object. Yet, the tableaux themselves were an occasion for the commodification of the female body: like an item on display, the woman was arranged on a framed stage where she had to stand still and silent, with close attention being paid to lighting effects, clothes and poses. Thereby, the result is that what Lily thinks is people’s astonished reactions to a moment of success, is instead a consternation dictated by the excessive revelation of her physical figure. The problem here is that the exhibition of the female body can be accepted as long as it leads to its purchase of a husband, but having Lily the reputation of turning down marriage proposals, to other people’s eyes she can only be associated with a promiscuous woman. The

occasion is even almost ironic since she is impersonating a woman in the act of carving her lover's name on a tree trunk, symbolizing her definitive union with him (Brooks, 1996: 103).

Unlike in Victorian England, where the tableaux were used as a form of art exhibit, in America their artistic intent becomes corrupted. Lily's public triumph is dictated by her power to not merely resemble the painting's subject, but to actually replace it, becoming it herself, yet her artistic intelligence turns debased as it is inscribed in a larger ideology where social climbing prevails over the pure appreciation of art.

> Of course, we must remember that this persuasive illusion of authenticity has been selected because of its ability to attract guests to the party. […] the effect here is to turn Lily into a museum piece. Her pose thus immediately starts to self-deconstruct through its participation in a system mediated by economics and fashion, rather than aesthetics (Gair, 1997: 366)

The setting of the scene is the home of the Wellington Brys, a newcomer couple trying to integrate into high society. It is noteworthy to remember that during the early years of the 20th century, a separation has been created between what can be called 'old' Old New York, the formal aristocracy represented by Mrs. Peniston (who indeed resembles the aristocratic families of the van der Luydens and the Archers in *The Age of Innocence*), and 'new' Old New York, represented by the Trenors and Lily's family. Both are threatened in their social status by the wealth of the new social climbers who seek to enter the higher rankings of society despite their apparent lack of proper taste and manners. As typical of Edith Wharton, the architectural elements in the novel are telling of the values of its owners. The author's sentimentalism for the New York of her childhood is present even in this novel, where by using the architecture to pass judgements upon the lifestyle of the newcomers, she implicitly defends the society of her time (Benstock, 1994: 341-343).

The Wellington Brys' house is described as if it were "designed for the display of a festal assemblage as one of those airy pleasure-halls which the Italian architects improvised to set off the hospitality of princes" (HM, 116). In its effort to imitate the European style, not only does it lack domesticity, the value regarded as fundamental by the aristocracy, but it also conveys a sense of exaggeration and falsity. Another example of the new rich's failure to create a private space for themselves rather than a public spectacle is the house of the Jewish businessman Simon Rosedale. In his character, the

author expresses the aristocracy's fear of losing the supremacy over society, since his success in the stock market predicts that sooner or later he will be richer than everyone else (Gair, 1997: 353-366).

In spite of his richness, in the transformed society of the turn of the century, money is not all that matters, for status is still reputed a valuable asset. This explains why Lily or Selden, who are not rich, are accepted as members of the upper crust, as they come from respectable families and possess cultivated beauty and refinement. It is not money that grants access to high society, but the hold of status; hence Rosedale, despite his enormous wealth, is scorned by members of the upper class, Lily included, because he does not possess the demeanor and manners of status owners. The simplest and most effective way he can rely on to enter high society is therefore through his association with Lily, a status holder. Conversely, the only thing Lily has left is status, which she needs to preserve at all costs, and when she does lose it, Rosedale openly tells her that he cannot marry her anymore because she has outlived her usefulness to him, proving that relationships in their society are based on financial, self-serving terms (Tavel, 2016: 342-346).

The haute bourgeoisie is a world where everything needs to be seen and commented upon, where wealth means nothing if it is not properly advertised.

> In the care of such a guardian, it soon became clear to Lily that she was to enjoy only the material advantages of good food and expensive clothing; and, though far from underrating these, she would gladly have exchanged them for what Mrs. Bart had taught her to regard as opportunities. (HM, 33)

As Lily's disdain for her life at Mrs. Peniston's proves, she is interested in money, but only when it is publicly displayed and enjoyed. "People can't marry you if they don't see you" (HM, 31), the assertion by Lily's mother, is exemplary of the importance of public visibility and of the conception of the woman as a commodity, to be openly exposed with the aim to be sold. However, as much as Lily regards herself as a commodity and behaves accordingly, she does not agree to be sold, defying the definition of commodity itself. Her continuous failures at marrying are not uniquely justified by external factors, but they also derive from an implicit will to sabotage her opportunities, proving that there is in fact a defiant attitude in her personality. Her final refusal to use Selden's letters to blackmail Bertha Dorset into withdrawing her accusations demonstrates Lily's noncompliance with the corrupted transactions of her social set, but her eventual death

proves that this is the only possible outcome to resisting the forces of the marketplace (Tyson, 1992: 3-5). Upper-class women cannot fulfil any other role than the non-productive one of public exhibitors of their husband's wealth; they do not possess any practical skill, as Lily's work in the millinery shop illustrates, because they have not been trained to know the functioning of a world different from their own. To this end, by failing to conform to their only role, they cannot endure life any longer. Wharton shares the deterministic view according to which the female sex has no other possibility to exist unless by playing by society's rules (Yeazell, 1992: 719-721).

3.2 Double standards and double identity

The society of *The House of Mirth* is concerned with nothing but shallow and trivial matters, putting social prestige and the means to maintain it above anything else. The values of truth and authenticity are suppressed by hypocrisy and the necessity to maintain appearances, especially that of propriety, considering that reputation is regarded as the fundamental social asset on which a person's (more specifically, a woman's) life prospect depends. Bertha Dorset's character is illustrative to this concept. Her habitual liaisons with other men are overlooked by other members of the upper class because of her great social influence, the same that allows her to be unquestionably believed when she spreads the rumour about Lily's illicit romance with her husband; the hold over social prestige gives her the power to destroy anyone else's reputation. That is the law in Lily's world: wealth justifies moral imprudence and any means to social advancement or to its perpetuation is allowed, but the moral principles must be sacrificed. The author depicts the continuous struggle Lily undergoes as she is divided between social climbing and maintaining her morality intact, when in fact both things exclude each other (Lidoff, 1980: 536).

Lily is an intelligent woman; she continuously interrogates herself on important matters and often debates with Selden about women's condition in society. From both her internal thoughts and dialogues with other characters, the reader understands that she is perfectly aware of her social position and of the contradictions that position implies (Despite being critical of the things she is compelled to do, she cannot escape performing them, as doing so would lead to some kind of social sanction. As a result, Lily perpetually

lives in a paradoxical way, despising a system whose materialistic values she then embraces: she desires money but disdains the means of acquiring it and does not safeguard the little she already has, she longs for wealth but is repulsed by the boredom it is tied to, and she disapproves of other's false behaviours in others while doing the same. However, the inconsistencies in Lily's identity are not her fault, but society's. The way she has been brought up forces her to behave in no other way as the nature of the leisure class is itself contradictory. For instance, Lily smokes and is forced to play bridge to keep being part of the Trenors' social circle, but tries to hide the events to Mr. Gryce as they are not acceptable in a respectable future wife. Yet, both activities can be exercised exactly because of the culture of conspicuous consumption that produces the goods of cigarettes and cards, proving that a woman must be part of that culture although she is not entitled to enjoy its goods without suffering their consequences (Brooks, 1996).

Especially in the early years of the 20th century, with existing urban spaces being reshaped and new ones being developed to adjust to the new social and working scene, a dilemma between the public show of the woman and her association with the domestic sphere is generated. The leisure woman's new necessity to be exposed to the public scrutiny contrasts with her previous belonging to the domestic sphere, becoming a liability when it should be a social and working profit.

Wharton creates Lily Bart as an illustration of how easy it is for women to lose their reputation in the American society of the early 1900s, reproducing in her life events the difficulties encountered in adapting to the new social requests while trying at the same time to retain the principles of the previous Victorian era.

> In fact, engaging in the public world led to all sorts of problems for society women. Traditional social conventions required women to behave and dress inconspicuously in public places, but the demands of high-society life required society women to seek notice and publicity. To cope with this contradiction, therefore, display and publicity had to be carefully managed. (Montgomery, 1998: 9)

Lily must carry characteristics that belong to both the social periods in spite of their being antithetical, and in their embodiment, Wharton mirrors men's perception of the woman through the binary dangerous vs. endangered woman. Recalling May's flowers in *The Age of Innocence*, Lily's name correlates her with innocence and purity that, contrarily, are imperilled by the corruption and social scandals she inattentively exposes herself to.

In the novel there are many instances when Lily finds herself caught up in the conflict between privacy and publicity, and the author's positioning of one of these moments in the first chapter is symbolic of the inevitability of the struggle. When Rosedale catches her leaving Selden's building, she immediately hides the event for she knows he is going to assume she has a romantic relationship. Her awareness of the situation is underlined by her many comments, e.g. "Could one never do the simplest, the most harmless thing, without subjecting oneself to some odious conjecture?" (HM, 12) and "Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine? Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?" (HM, 13). Regardless, there is nothing that can be done to avoid being labelled as a promiscuous woman, for if the mere being seen in public is a reputational hazard, exiting alone a man's house is a sure reputational sentence. Another crucial moment is that of Mr. Trenor's deception, but the difference here is that the gravity of the action is bigger as he is a married man. Moreover, the action takes place at night, underlining the effort to keep the experience secret, but the fact that Selden and a relative of Lily's happen to be strolling outside at that hour underlines the impossibility to escape society's scrutiny (Von Rosk, 2001: 324-352).

Many of the episodes contributing to Lily's downfall happen indeed at night and under the electrical light of streetlamps, instituting a parallel between her and prostitutes' behaviour. After losing her reputation, Lily wanders through the city and frequents despicable places, resting herself on public benches and staying at boarding houses, contributing to her association with promiscuity. By setting the beginning of the story between apartments, residences and idyllic landscapes and terminating it among the city streets, hotels and working places, Wharton uses the geographical elements to delineate Lily's dramatic journey into poverty and social ostracism (Benert, 1990: 35-37).

What really condemns Lily is the loss of a home and more largely, of a private space. It is not a chance that Mrs. Peniston dies – and consequently Lily loses a home – in the same period of Lily's cruise to Europe, where Bertha Dorset causes her final loss of reputation. Moreover, the fact that it does not happen in New York nor America is significant of the ability of culture to follow people even if they physically distance themselves from it. Although initially possessing a home of sorts at Mrs. Peniston's, that space does not reflect Lily's personality, as she suggests with her continuous wish to

transform the living room and with the juxtaposition of her bedroom with a prison. Furthermore, the privacy this house affords her aunt, who shuns from the public life and worries herself with trivial domestic matters, has the counter effect of creating a lifeless atmosphere which prompts Lily to look for life elsewhere, in the public realm. Besides, the fact that the charwoman at Selden's building is also working at Mrs. Peniston's is a metaphor for publicity being able to enter privacy. Nevertheless, while the domesticity of the home can be life-denying, the publicity of the social sphere can be life-condemning, so that there is not a viable choice of real fulfilling life for women, who need to learn how to endure this duality (Von Rosk, 2001: 332-333).

To embrace the contradiction, women created a duality in their person too, a splitting of their identity into two parts, a private and a public one. Wharton uses Lily as an emblem of this double personality and shows the difficulty of switching between one and the other and the consequences of such a behaviour. In the presentation of her public self, Lily is skilled at using her surroundings to integrate her own beauty: she pays attention to the way her clothes accentuate her figure and to how she is struck by lights, even recurring to the exploitation of nature:

> The spot was charming, and Lily was not insensible to the charm, or to the fact that her presence enhanced it; but she was not accustomed to taste the joys of solitude except in company, and the combination of a handsome girl and a romantic scene struck her as too good to be wasted. (HM, 52)

Lily's appreciation of nature in terms of its usefulness alludes to how the demand of public visibility can lead to the corruption of true and beautiful things (Tyson, 1992: 3-4).

Selden's perception of Lily's canny self and his many comments about her mysterious nature and the intents that drive her actions validate the difficulty of discerning her true self. What the 'real' Lily is or is not is very much a recurrent theme in the novel. Even though Selden is the only person with whom Lily does not employ a social façade disguising her real opinions and actions, he too does not fully penetrate her consciousness, and the reason is that she is the first not to know herself. Due to the artifice ruling her public self and the requirement to adopt it more frequently than her private one, she does not know how nor wants to exist with the latter. She does not connect with herself and interiority, always seeking other people's company not to be by herself; as a consequence, she is dependent on others and cannot exist alone, and her despair can only culminate in

an ambiguous suicide, after which Selden's belief he is seeing “the real Lily” (HM, 285) adds up to the idea that her life was an obstacle to her honesty and true self (Lidoff, 1980: 525).

The social identity imposed on women, and to a certain degree on men too, prevents them from speaking the truth and from instituting profound connections. Over the course of the novel, Lily starts looking at affections cynically because she has never experienced disinterested and selfless ones; love, generosity and politeness exist, but they are proportional to a person's social prestige, thus not authentic. After her escaped sexual assault, Lily recognizes she has no one to rely on for moral support, proving that nobody cares deeply about nobody else. Not even Lily’s only family, Mrs. Peniston, is capable of showing trust or compassion, for she relies on gossips about the Dorset scandal rather than listening to her own nephew’s version of the story. From the countless examples the novel offers the reader, it is clear that New Yorkers are a hypocritical and double-faced array, priding themselves on the adherence to moral principles when they are instead simply following power dynamics suppressing those who really live by them. Their only moral acts come from the will to be publicly approved, such as Mrs. Trenor’s will to create a successful marriage between Lily and Mr. Gryce and Mrs. Peniston’s taking in of Lily to be acclaimed as a charitable lady.

However, there are a few exceptions in the novel, namely Rosedale, Nettie Struthers and Gerty. Regarding Rosedale, contrary to most people, he speaks plainly and frankly, without hiding behind false pretenses. In this regard, he is similar to Lily as he wants the socialite life but knows and scorns the difficulties of taking part in it. With his honesty and his helping Lily even after her downfall, he proves that he holds a moral rectitude the other members of the upper class have perpetually lost, eventually defeating Lily’s disgust towards him and gaining her sympathy. It is through his candid opinion that Lily understands she can be part of society only by abiding to its rules, since she could do anything to regain her position, but only if she chooses to sacrifice her moral principles. As for Gerty, a parallel can be instituted between her and Lily’s cousin, Grace Stepney, as they both have different reasons to resent Lily. While the latter’s resentment turns into Lily’s defamation to her aunt’s eyes, Gerty can put aside her acrimony because she prefers to create meaningful and honest relationships rather than acting for herself

and her interests, stressing how the desire to be part of the beau monde can lead to immoral behavior, while distancing from it allows to retain moral principles.

Likewise, Lily herself will prove to be better than her social set. The novel can be read in terms of her moral evolution, where with her social descent, there is concurrently a growth in her moral values. Despite being divided between the need to achieve the lifestyle she desires and the will to retain the morality that lifestyle perverts, Lily demonstrates multiple times her capacity to stick to moral values and finally, her choice to burn the letters to preserve Selden's reputation suggests her definitive repudiation of high society's corrupt transactions. In opposition to her initial disdain for people who live in poverty, when Lily finds herself in the same position, she realizes that it is not a humiliating way of living because there are real human connections, as a girl she had previously helped at Gerty's charity, Netty, proves by offering her hospitality at her house. Nettie is also the character through which Wharton depicts her conception of the ideal marriage, one where there is reciprocal cooperation between the man and the woman. The message the episode conveys is that marriage should be a spiritual companionship of two people who love and respect each other rather than an economic obligation aimed at the preservation of the elite. Lily experiences for the first time the happiness brought by true love and family ties she has never felt in her own family. Still, Nettie has been able to create a life for herself only thanks to her husband's faith in her, alluding to the fact that this kind of free and fulfilling life is not a viable choice for single independent women. Wharton denounces the reality of women's position in society at the beginning of the 20th century, where female independence is possible only though a marriage of love, that is still by associating with a man (Von Rosk, 2001: 345-346).

Although Lily has a final awakening to the direction her life wants to take, it comes too late. Her death indicates that it is necessary to cultivate moral integrity and abide to higher values of honesty and compassion, refusing society's degrading principles, during the entire life, and not just resolving the dilemma at the end, because the inevitable fate is to die.

As a matter of fact, fate is an important element in Wharton's fiction. "It was a hateful fate—but how escape from it? What choice had she? To be herself, or a Gerty Farish" (HM, 23). Since the beginning of the novel, the author sets an opposition between the two characters: if on the one hand Gerty, who is described as plain and shabby, is an

example of virtuous ideals, on the other hand Lily is beautiful and gracious, but adopts dishonest and unethical behaviors, almost as if goodness and beauty excluded each other. Even Lily's comment, "But we're so different, you know; she likes being good, and I like being happy" (HM, 7), indicates Wharton's belief in the preclusion of working-class women to be admired and valued by others, and of well-bred women to live an independent and upright life (Cain, 1989: 7-8). Despite some critics believing Lily had the possibility to make different life choices, the truth is that she has never been inherently free, neither externally nor internally. Because the system she has been brought up into has already influenced her at an implicit level, she is destined to act within the ideological confines of her society. Both Lily and her mother feel as if they are not in control of their lives and blame fate for their misfortunes; their inability to take responsibility for their actions derives from women's impossibility to develop a mature and independent self (Coulombe, 1996: 5).

Wharton's novelistic intent in the book is to expose the woman's condition of immaturity and subordination as a result of the difficulty to exist in a society that asks of women the same things for which it condemns them. Given the position the female sex was assigned to in the culture of conspicuous consumption, a culture even Wharton was part of, as Lidoff writes, she could see no other possible ending to Lily's story except death, for "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys" (Wharton, *A Backword Glance*, quoted in Blair, 2012: 138; Lidoff, 1980: 537-539).

3.3 Reverting gender stereotypes: Lawrence Selden

It is noteworthy to mention that, similarly to *The Age of Innocence*, also in *The House of Mirth* Edith Wharton proves to be interested not only in the realistic portrayal of women's condition in society, but also in the depiction of the position of the male sex, and it is on Lawrence Selden that the author focuses this attention. His character has been constructed in a way that defies the conventional gender categorizations of the early 20th century: by being interested in the aesthetic realm of art and literature rather than in the business arrangements of the social world, he does not present typical male features, and his inclinations are instead associated with a more feminine temperament. Having little

finances given his belonging to the middle class, Selden does not fulfill the role of the family money-maker, which was the only way the male gender was viewed in the consumeristic American society. However, he consciously chooses to do so, as he regards society as the reason for the repression of a person's true self and for the enslavement to a mechanism that precludes happiness. In the conception of what he calls the 'republic of the spirit', happiness derives precisely from the rejection of the materiality and social competition of the public realm (Coulombe, 1996).

In the same way as Newland Archer, Lawrence Selden uses the language of the anthropologist to criticize New York's society and its conventions. There is an alternation between the author's and Selden's narrative voice, which emerges especially during his encounters with Lily and has the function of pointing out the contradiction between the woman's perception by men and her real self. Lily's love for Selden comes mainly from the desire to have the same things that he has: complete independence and therefore detachment from the social world. In the first dialogue between them at Selden's apartment, Lily opposes her need to marry to acquire financial stability to Selden's possibility to remain single and still be economically independent. Lily's fondness for Selden is also a desire to be as capable as he is to manage the fine line between privacy and conspicuousness which, as a woman in the public realm where society journalism's eyes are everywhere, she has much more difficulty at doing. By using Lawrence as the narrative perspective into Lily's personality but not giving him complete access to her identity, especially with the final choice to kill her off, Wharton also denies readers the possibility to see Lily's authentic nature, in this way both emphasizing women's disqualification from the development of a personal identity and creating a counter-discourse to society's gossips (Moddelmog, 1998).

Since the beginning, readers are prompted to look at Lily as a "victim of the civilization which had produced her" (HM, 7), alluding at the impossibility to discern the individual from its society. Selden tries many times to open Lily's eyes about what really matters in life, but his efforts work as long as Lily accepts to make them work. What is interesting about Selden is that he is not the typical 'hero' who wants to save the woman in distress – opposing himself to Newland, who sees Ellen as a victim in need of help – instead, he never forces Lily and lets her make her own decisions, even if they do not correspond with his outlook on life. Of course, he would like her to separate herself from

societal conventions, because by doing so she would be able to accept their love. Selden's, and even Gerty's, appreciation of Lily's beauty in the tableaux vivants derives from their anti-materialism, since all the other people at the party are more concerned with her conspicuousness. Selden's capacity to separate Lily from the social context in which she is performing also speaks for his wish that she cared less about power and social prestige, so that she could live a better life where they would be together (Mullen, 2009: 40).

Although Selden declares his detachment from society allows him to enjoy a moral superiority, he too faces the limits of his gendered position and reaffirms his connection with that same society. When he sees Lily leave Trenor's house alone, he falls victim to the ideology of gender stereotyping, assuming she has been intimate with a married man, and subsequently avoiding her on the basis of her supposed promiscuity. He later tries to help her when he realizes she is in great distress, but seeing her again in a corrupted environment, that of Mrs. Hatch's hotel, he recoils to the aesthetic world to preserve his own principles and philosophy. His 'republic of the spirit' is just an ideal that does not necessarily have consequences in real life. At the end of the novel, Selden finally raises above his principles, proving that his anthropological knowledge allows him to understand when it is necessary to favor the individual desire over the social fatalism, but it is still unattainable to completely break free from that fatalism, therefore even Selden, and more largely the male gender, is enslaved to society (Trilling, 1962-1963: 122-124).

Conclusion

This B.A. thesis has examined the social dynamics of New York's 19th – and 20th – century leisure class, focusing in particular on women's condition in the Victorian society and on the contradictions in their social advancement at the turn of the century as represented through the characters of Wharton's novels *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*.

I have described the patriarchal society of the Victorian era and the dogmas imposed on women, namely the biological determinism that saw the female sex as naturally weak and inferior, and the doctrine of the separate spheres that justified a separation in men's and women's sphere of influence. These ideologies, supported by the institution of marriage, were so effective that they remained unquestioned for a long time, but they eventually started to be challenged by feminist reform movements which demanded gender equality and wider access to the public sphere. A different conception of the woman that contrasted with the previous ideal of the domestic and submissive one emerged and, as it appropriated of qualities and activities that until that moment had always been men's prerogative, it was seen as a threat to the male authority. Despite having succeeded in the achievement of some of their claims, women found themselves in an equally subordinate, if not more complex, position: they needed to adapt to the new requests of demonstrating their class's wealth by showing themselves in public, but they also had to retain the values of purity and domesticity of the previous era.

In *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton creates female characters who embody the struggles their sex must face to simply survive in the society they are born into. Both Ellen Olenska and Lily Bart share characteristics of the New Woman – they smoke and dress conspicuously, they have a sharpness of mind and a spirited nature, and they lay claim to the same rights accorded to men – but also of the True Woman, for their belonging to the aristocracy requires them to preserve the standards of chastity and guiltlessness. Wharton portrays them as victims of the social scrutiny, as being exposed to it can lead to the loss of the reputation and therefore to social ostracism, while it is that same scrutiny responsible for the demand of the public display of women. In the characters of Lily and Ellen, Wharton also exemplifies the male objectification of the female body by Newland in the first case, and by the culture of

conspicuous consumption in the second, and demonstrates the power the institution of marriage holds over the female body and identity. While Ellen would like to free herself from a marriage that makes her unhappy and tries to regain the properties she has ceded to her husband at the moment of their union, Lily is instead forced to enter into one in order to gain financial freedom, but despises the fact that it is the only means she can rely on to do so; however, in both cases marriage proves to be a narrowing of the individuality and a suppression of the legal and emotional freedom.

On the other hand, it is mainly through the characters of Lily and May Welland that Wharton represents the inconsistencies between the female and male construction of women's identity. By choosing Newland Archer and Lawrence Selden as the point of view of the narrative, the way the female characters appear to readers is through a man's perspective on them. The third person narrator, nonetheless, offers evidences of their true nature, revealing the misperception and the limits of men's knowledge of the female sex. The initial typification of May as the innocent and gullible girl is later contrasted by her intelligence and cunningness; while in *The House of Mirth*, Selden's and the reader's finite insight into Lily's consciousness opposes to the ever-present sight of society journalism and denies the possibility of discerning women's real identity, alluding at the fact that they might not even possess one.

However, while Wharton strongly criticizes men's inclination towards female stereotyping, her understanding and sympathy towards them are evident due to her personal experience as a member of the high society. This first-hand knowledge enables her to fully comprehend the oppressive nature of the mechanisms at play within the haute bourgeoisie, affecting all its members irrespective of their gender. The novels' protagonists, Newland and Lily, can actually result unsympathetic to readers for their self-absorption and apparent concern with trivial matters, but they are faithful depictions of the individual's submission to the hypocritical and unmoral principles of New York's society. They are aware of the social boundaries confining them to a position of entrapment, but at the same time, exactly because they are entrapped, they cannot chart an original path to liberty. Although Lily is more self-conscious than Newland, just like him she cannot act differently, at least not in time before her death. Wharton reflects in her novels her own condition and experience as a member of Old New York. Even if she stood apart from her novel's characters in terms of her intellectual and emotional

independence, possessing a keen perception of the moral and ethical dilemmas in life and refusing to succumb to the superficiality of societal norms, her conventional upbringing still played an important part in shaping her identity, and it influenced her writings.

In my thesis, I demonstrate that the significance of Edith Wharton's New York fiction stems from her remarkable talent in portraying the societal challenges and gender dynamics of her own society, while simultaneously acknowledging her personal alignment with some of its principles and consequently showing in her own persona their compelling power on even their most condemning critic.

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Summary in Italian

Il periodo che va dal 1800 al 1900 in America è caratterizzato da uno spirito rivoluzionario che portò a grandi cambiamenti culturali, riguardanti soprattutto la condizione della donna nella società, la quale iniziò a sentire la necessità di affermarsi come agente pubblico, abbandonando molte delle convenzioni della precedente età vittoriana.

Durante questa epoca, la donna era considerata naturalmente più debole e intellettualmente inferiore rispetto all'uomo, il quale veniva invece visto come razionale, autosufficiente e forte, caratteristiche che gli permettevano di giustificare la propria superiorità e l'accesso privilegiato alla sfera pubblica. Al contrario, la dottrina delle sfere separate assegnava alla donna il ruolo principale di moglie e madre, relegandola all'interno delle mura domestiche. Per sostenere questa ideologia, fu creato il culto della True Woman, secondo il quale le donne dovevano essere modelli di virtù, mantenendo le proprie attività ed interessi nella dimensione privata della loro casa e astenendosi dal sesso prima del matrimonio. Qualsiasi altro modello di vita veniva condannato in quanto innaturale e poco femminile, e la donna che veniva colpita da ostracismo non poteva fare più nulla per riguadagnare la propria reputazione. L'istituzione del matrimonio veniva usata come uno strumento di tutela maschile poiché qualsiasi proprietà la donna possedesse, compreso il proprio corpo, nel momento in cui la loro unione veniva sancita, passava al marito e non poteva più essere riconquistata.

Nonostante la virtù della domesticità rimase indubbiamente indiscussa per molto tempo, alla fine del 1800 il malcontento femminile nei confronti della società patriarcale iniziò ad emergere. Sempre più stanche della loro subordinazione, le donne iniziarono a richiedere maggiori diritti e pari opportunità al genere maschile, esigendo anche di poter avere un accesso più ampio alla sfera pubblica. In questa prospettiva, emerse il fenomeno culturale e politico della New Woman, termine che identifica una donna che rifiuta i ruoli di genere tradizionali e cerca di affermare la propria autonomia e indipendenza dal genere maschile. Tuttavia, nonostante le donne siano effettivamente riuscite ad avere un maggiore accesso alla sfera pubblica, godendo di beni e servizi precedentemente riservati esclusivamente agli uomini e di nuove opportunità di lavoro, la loro presenza in questo territorio fu comunque contestata in quanto metteva in discussione l'autorità maschile.

Inoltre, queste conquiste non ebbero solamente il positivo risvolto di una maggiore emancipazione, ma anche uno negativo di soggettazione. Infatti, i cambiamenti portati dalla modernizzazione di fine secolo trasformarono la natura della classe agiata e il conseguente ruolo della donna in essa, il quale diventò di dimostrare pubblicamente, attraverso i propri vestiti, gioielli e condotta, la ricchezza del proprio marito. Se prima la loro posizione sociale non gli permetteva di mostrarsi in pubblico se non per particolari occasioni facenti parte degli usi e della tradizione della loro società, ora erano continuamente esposte allo sguardo persino del giornalismo mondano, e dovevano gestire la loro immagine pubblica in modo da non essere troppo appariscenti e scambiate con prostitute.

Alla luce di quanto detto, per la maggior parte delle donne del passaggio tra il XIX e il XX secolo, gli obiettivi moderni di uguaglianza e autonomia personale erano spesso sfuggenti. Nonostante abbiano lottato per maggiori diritti e abbiano smascherato preconcetti riguardanti il genere femminile e la sessualità, esse si sono trovate nella paradossale necessità di bilanciare il loro desiderio di emancipazione con le norme tradizionali.

La scrittrice Edith Wharton, essendo cresciuta in un'importante famiglia dell'antica New York, si trovò anch'ella ad affrontare le rivendicazioni di emancipazione femminile che caratterizzavano il nuovo secolo, nonostante dovesse allo stesso tempo rispettare i principi conservatori dell'epoca. La scrittura divenne per lei un modo per affrontare la complessa realtà sociale circostante e, grazie alla sua abilità artistica, trasformò le sue esperienze in opere d'arte potenti e significative, affermandosi come una scrittrice di romanzi di successo. Tra le sue opere, che spaziano tra generi diversi compresi libri sul design e di critica culturale e letteraria, le più rilevanti sono sicuramente i romanzi. Ella trasse ispirazione dal mondo e dalle persone che la circondavano, focalizzandosi sulle attività ed i valori dell'alta società newyorkese e sul cambiamento storico e sociale all'avvicinarsi del nuovo secolo. Wharton è una dei pochi autori perfettamente qualificati per poter trattare queste tematiche, in quanto la sua provenienza da una tipica famiglia americana vittoriana le conferiva una profonda comprensione delle dinamiche e degli interessi dell'alta borghesia. Al contempo, grazie alla sua indole ribelle, riuscì a coglierne le contraddizioni e a descriverne l'apparenza dall'esterno.

Le sue opere trattano un insieme di temi comuni rilevanti anche al giorno d'oggi, i quali possono essere visualizzati a coppie contrapposte, ovvero la differenza tra il progresso sociale e la tradizione, tra il determinismo sociale e la libertà individuale, tra la costruzione dell'identità femminile da parte dell'uomo e della donna, e infine tra i continenti di Europa e America, con una particolare attenzione anche all'architettura e all'antropologia. All'interno dei suoi due più famosi romanzi, *L'età dell'innocenza* e *La casa della gioia*, Edith Wharton denuncia la società patriarcale e la discriminazione delle donne.

L'età dell'innocenza, il romanzo che nel 1921 le valse il primo Premio Pulitzer mai conferito ad una donna, è ambientato nel mondo dell'alta società newyorkese degli anni 1870, il periodo dell'infanzia di Wharton, e segue le vicende di un suo membro, Newland Archer, un giovane avvocato promesso sposo a May Welland, appartenente alla sua stessa classe sociale. La loro unione viene messa a dura prova dall'arrivo a New York della cugina di May, la Contessa Ellen Olenska, che è fuggita dall'Europa a causa del suo infelice matrimonio con un conte polacco. Volendo divorziare, viene seguita da Newland nel caso legale, ma egli diventa sempre più un consigliere delle tradizioni e regole sociali di New York, delle quali Ellen non è a conoscenza e che quindi infrange. Newland è attratto dalla non convenzionalità di Ellen, l'opposto dell'innocenza e della prevedibilità di May, e presto i due si innamorano, ma i doveri e le convenzioni sociali impediscono che il loro amore si concretizzi, e alla fine portano Newland a sposare May e a non esserle mai infedele. L'ultimo capitolo del romanzo è ambientato 26 anni dopo, quando uno dei figli di Newland gli offre la possibilità di rincontrare Ellen a Parigi, ma, anche se si reca nella città, quando si trova davanti a casa sua, sceglie di non vederla.

Newland è a tutti gli effetti un membro dell'alta società, il quale dà grande importanza ai riti e alle tradizioni di New York, come andare all'Opera, a balli e a cene private. Nonostante si reputi diverso rispetto a tutti i suoi coetanei poiché legge e viaggia molto, anche lui possiede una coscienza limitata alla propria cultura, della quale critica alcuni aspetti, come l'ipocrisia della società e la discriminazione del sesso femminile, ma le cui parole non vengono seguite da una loro applicazione concreta nella realtà. È proprio a causa del fatto che anche lui applica stereotipi e pregiudizi di genere che non riesce a comprendere la vera natura di May, che ritiene essere una ragazza immatura e ingenua, né a vedere che lui ed Ellen hanno una percezione del mondo troppo diversa per poter

stare insieme. Ellen è infatti una donna indipendente e con una chiara percezione della forza delle norme sociali e dei dilemmi morali che esse comportano, mentre Newland è immerso in un suo mondo irreale che usa come "scudo" per non dover guardare in faccia la realtà che la propria posizione sociale impedisce la realizzazione dei suoi veri sentimenti e desideri. Al contempo, May è molto più astuta di quello che Newland pensa, poiché è in realtà a conoscenza della sua relazione con Ellen e complotta vari piani per poter impedire la loro unione.

Attraverso il personaggio di Ellen, il romanzo si concentra anche sull'opposizione tra le culture di America ed Europa, in quanto è nata all'interno della prima, ma è cresciuta ed è stata influenzata dalla seconda, allo stesso modo dell'autrice Wharton. Quest'ultima riteneva che la donna francese, sebbene avesse meno diritti legali rispetto all'americana, fosse fondamentalmente più emancipata e possedesse una maturità che quest'ultima non aveva. Oltretutto, l'Europa in generale era più libera dalla rigidità di convenzioni sociali e permetteva uno stile di vita più originale e creativo. Ellen è proprio questo: creativa ed artistica, ad esempio nel modo in cui decora la propria casa e in cui si atteggia, in opposizione a Newland e al resto di New York, la cui unica forma di arte che possono concepire è quella dei dipinti, statici ed immutabili come la loro società. Per creare un'opposizione tra le due culture, Wharton utilizza anche gli elementi architettonici, le case e i loro interni, poiché riteneva che ci fosse una connessione tra l'ambiente in cui le persone abitavano e i loro tratti fisici e psicologici.

Nei personaggi di Newland, May ed Ellen, Edith Wharton rappresenta parti contrastanti della propria personalità, a dimostrazione del fatto che la sua formazione convenzionale nella società dell'antica New York ha influito nella creazione di contraddizioni ed incoerenze nella sua identità. È soprattutto in Newland che esprime la forza delle convenzioni sociali, capaci di legare l'individuo alla propria società nonostante egli la critichi e la consideri la fonte della propria infelicità, sacrificando così la libertà individuale. Wharton è infatti una grande critica della sua classe sociale, ma riconosce anche la sua personale identificazione con alcuni dei suoi principi, che la porta dunque a condannare, e allo stesso tempo difendere, la New York della sua infanzia.

Il romanzo *La casa della gioia* è invece ambientato ad inizio 1900 e narra la storia di Lily Bart e delle difficoltà che incontra nel vivere in una società alla quale desidera appartenere ma dalla quale, allo stesso tempo, vorrebbe distaccarsi. Lily è nata in una

famiglia dell'alta società, ma avendo già 29 anni e non essendosi ancora sposata, e non ricevendo un regolare assegno dalla zia, la signora Peniston, con cui vive in seguito alla morte dei genitori, deve trovare un marito se vuole mantenere il proprio status sociale. Nonostante le sue aspirazioni, tutti i suoi tentativi di attrarre uomini ricchi falliscono, e poiché l'amore vero che prova per un avvocato della borghesia, Lawrence Selden, non le garantisce lo stile di vita che desidera, rimarrà sola e persino emarginata, subendo le conseguenze di vari scandali sociali in cui si trova coinvolta, e alla fine si suiciderà o morirà accidentalmente a causa di un'overdose di farmaci.

La scelta di ambientare la storia in un'altra epoca, quella dei primi anni del XX secolo, ha lo scopo di mostrare un altro aspetto della società newyorkese, ovvero la cultura consumistica e il suo impatto sulla figura della donna. Nel mondo di Lily vi è un'incessante competizione a chi è il più ricco e socialmente in vista; dunque, tutto ciò che è utile a raggiungere quella posizione ha un prezzo e non può essere ottenuto senza dover restituire qualcosa in cambio, che sia nella forma di favori sociali, sessuali o con la semplice propria presenza. Lily, essendo molto bella e raffinata, con il suo semplice mostrarsi insieme a delle persone, attrae l'attenzione del resto della società e contribuisce automaticamente ad innalzare il loro status sociale. Ciò è dovuto alla mercificazione della donna e del suo corpo, la quale sta alla base del mercato matrimoniale dell'alta società. Il matrimonio non era infatti visto come l'unione di due persone che si amano e si rispettano, ma piuttosto come un contratto sociale ed economico attraverso il quale potevano essere ottenuti vantaggi sociali ed economici. All'interno di questa ideologia, il ruolo degli uomini è quello di guadagnare o mettere a disposizione la loro ricchezza, mentre quello delle donne è di esibirla pubblicamente.

Tra le tradizioni e attività della classe agiata, molte erano specificamente organizzate per l'oggettivazione pubblica della donna e del suo corpo, come ad esempio i tableaux vivants, ovvero rappresentazioni dal vivo di famosi quadri in cui i personaggi venivano interpretati per la maggior parte da donne. In uno di questi spettacoli, Lily si esibisce, attraendo l'attenzione di tutti per via delle linee del corpo molto visibili e suscitando così la critica di molti, poiché l'esibizione della donna è accettata, ma non quando è troppo evidente e non è supportata dall'appartenenza a un marito o dalla volontà di trovarne uno, cosa che Lily apparentemente sembra non voler fare.

Questa difficoltà nel gestire la propria apparenza pubblica, cercando allo stesso tempo di preservare la privacy, è un tema ricorrente nei romanzi di Wharton, in quanto dimostra l'ipocrisia delle norme sociali, che costringono la donna a mettere in pericolo la propria reputazione per poterla invece assicurare del tutto. Inoltre, essa è la ragione per cui le donne possiedono una doppia personalità, una pubblica ed una privata, l'ultima delle quali è però poco sviluppata in quanto sovrastata dalla prima. Il risultato è che le donne non possiedono veramente una loro identità svincolata dal contesto sociale, e non possono dunque essere autonome e, di conseguenza, libere.

Entrambi i romanzi mostrano l'ipocrisia e la moralità corrotta dell'alta società americana, e di come chi vi si ribelli ne faccia al contempo parte, dando dunque prova della forza che una società, cultura o classe sociale sono in grado di esercitare sulla libertà individuale.